Ursula K. Le Guin: The Birthday of the World

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Fantasy & Science Fiction

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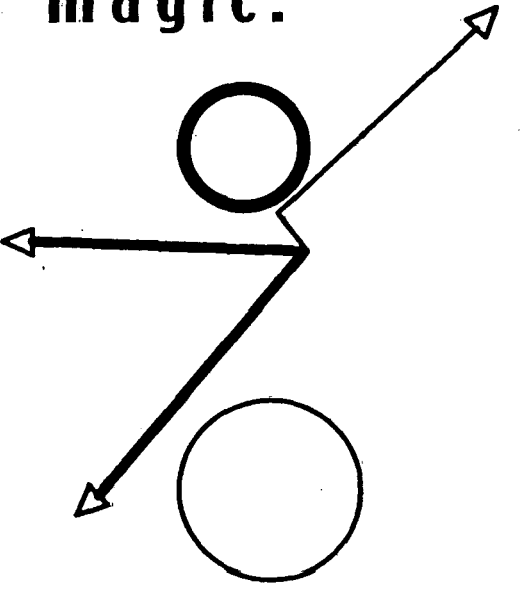

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EDITORIAL

GORDON VAN GELDER

NOW THAT we're into an election year and the primaries are under way, I thought I should trot out my pet theory about genre fiction. Some of you have already heard me discuss it at conventions or read it before in the online magazine *Hellnotes*, but it needs a bit of exercise every couple of years or so. Like most such theories, it oversimplifies matters, but I like to think it has a modicum of truth to it:

In popular fiction and in film, the horror genre thrives when Republicans are in the White House, while mysteries thrive when Democrats are in office.

I've seen ample evidence for this theory during the past two decades — horror boomed and mysteries cowered while Ronald Reagan was President, but mysteries have prospered since President Clinton's first month in office while horror has been the toughest genre to sell.

From what I can tell, the pattern roughly applies across the years — from the concurrence of Nixon with *The Exorcist*, past Kennedy's fondness for Ian Fleming's spy novels, through the paranoid horrors of Eisenhower's era, and back to Franklin D. Roosevelt, whose own interest in mysteries sparked careers in much the same way that Bill Clinton boosted the sales of Walter Mosley's and Michael Connelly's books.

Of course there are examples to the contrary (*Rosemary's Baby* came out during LBJ's term, etc., etc.), but bear with me and suppose there's something to this pattern. So? What does this trend say?

Near as I can figure, mystery and horror fiction both address social and domestic ills. If society had no crime and no problems, we'd have no fiction of this sort. (Recall Plato's *Republic* had no artists.) But the difference is that mysteries suggest

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that someone is listening — that someone cares about these ills and is investigating their roots — while horror tends to serve more as a shriek of despair. When nobody is paying attention, you have to shout.

Or to put it another way, horror tends to show what's behind the façade.

Republican administrations characteristically don't address social issues as generously as Democrats do, and consequently horror fiction tends to become a more vital mode of expression during those years. In Geoff Ryman's 1992 novel *Was*, there's a perceptive observation (made by an actor who portrays a Freddy Krueger-like character) that the only genres that would deal with family issues were situation comedy and horror.

I've been trying for several years to discern a paradigm of this sort that applies to science fiction, but thus far any such theory has eluded me. Sf's popularity seems to be linked more strongly to the technology of the times than it is to the politics. Films like *Independence Day* and *Star Wars* would not have fared so well commercially if they'd appeared in the midst of an anti-technology movement. (David Skal suggested in his book *Screams of Reason* that sf is connected to faith in the American government, but I think there's more to it. Personally, I'd love to see someone analyze the 1977 appearance of *Star Wars* — desert planets, hot-rod spaceships, and all — in light of U.S. relations with the Middle East during the oil crisis of the time.)

Lately, I've started to believe that the sf and fantasy genres are linked in a manner similar to that of mysteries and horror. Fantasies — especially those of the epic sort that have sold so well in the last few years — tend to address matters of state and empire, matters of the land. Science fiction, meanwhile, looks abroad to foreign issues. Another observation of David Skal's (who is, incidentally, wonderful at this sort of social analysis of popular culture) is that the standard image we have of the "Roswell" alien — a slight, short humanoid with large sloping eyes — didn't really come into our culture until the late 1960s and early 1970s. Skal suggests that the alien image might be a reflection of our anxieties towards the Vietnamese, who tend to be slighter and shorter than Americans....

(By the way, this observation of Skal's was removed from *Screams of Reason* for fear that the observation might be offensive to some. Why

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is it *verboten* nowadays to discuss matters of cultural heritage?)

I realize this introduction to my pet theory barely lets you get to know it, but I find deadlines pressing upon me, so it'll be some time before you get to see it perform any tricks. Meantime, I wouldn't advise you to cast your ballot according to this theory — after all, what we're talking about is primarily entertainment, not governmental policy. But I for one am curious to see what happens to genre fiction once the next President takes office.

— GVG

"Yep...calendar says full moon."

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Ursula Le Guin's last appearance here was the lovely "Darkrose and Diamond" in our most recent anniversary issue. Her latest novel, a new work of science fiction entitled The Telling, *is due out later this year. Like most of Ms. Le Guin's work, "The Birthday of the World" calls to mind descriptive adjectives of the highest sort. In this case, they include* fascinating, masterful, *and* divine. *But just what does that last one mean?*

The Birthday of the World

By Ursula K. Le Guin

TAZU WAS HAVING A TANTRUM, because he was three. After the birthday of the world, tomorrow, he would be four and would not have tantrums.

He had left off screaming and kicking and was turning blue from holding his breath. He lay on the ground stiff as a corpse, but when Haghag stepped over him as if he wasn't there, he tried to bite her foot.

"This is an animal or a baby," Haghag said, "not a person." She glanced may-I-speak-to-you and I glanced yes. "Which does God's daughter think it is," she asked, "an animal or a baby?"

"An animal. Babies suck, animals bite," I said. All the servants of God laughed and tittered, except the new barbarian, Ruaway, who never smiled. Haghag said, "God's daughter must be right. Maybe somebody ought to put the animal outside. An animal shouldn't be in the holy house."

"I'm not an aminal!" Tazu screamed, getting up, his fists clenched and his eyes as red as rubies. "I'm God's son!"

"Maybe," Haghag said, looking him over. "This doesn't look so much

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like an animal now. Do you think this might be God's son?" she asked the holy women and men, and they all nodded their bodies, except the wild one, who stared and said nothing.

"I am, I am God's son!" Tazu shouted. "Not a baby! Arzi is the baby!" Then he burst into tears and ran to me, and I hugged him and began crying because he was crying. We cried till Haghag took us both on her lap and said it was time to stop crying, because God Herself was coming. So we stopped, and the bodyservants wiped the tears and snot from our faces and combed our hair, and Lady Clouds brought our gold hats, which we put on to see God Herself.

She came with her mother, who used to be God Herself a long time ago, and the new baby, Arzi, on a big pillow carried by the idiot. The idiot was a son of God too. There were seven of us: Omimo, who was fourteen and had gone to live with the army, then the idiot, who was twelve, and had a big round head and small eyes and liked to play with Tazu and the baby, then Goïz, and another Goïz, who were called that because they had died and were in the ash-house where they ate spirit food, then me and Tazu, who would get married and be God, and then Babam Arzi, Lord Seven. I was important because I was the only daughter of God. If Tazu died I could marry Arzi, but if I died everything would be bad and difficult, Haghag said. They would have to act as if Lady Clouds' daughter Lady Sweetness was God's daughter and marry her to Tazu, but the world would know the difference. So my mother greeted me first, and Tazu second. We knelt and clasped our hands and touched our foreheads to our thumbs. Then we stood up, and God asked me what I had learned that day.

I told her what words I had learned to read and write.

"Very good," God said. "And what have you to ask, daughter?"

"I have nothing to ask, I thank you, Lady Mother," I said. Then I remembered I did have a question, but it was too late.

"And you, Tazu? What have you learned this day?"

"I tried to bite Haghag."

"Did you learn that was a good thing to do, or a bad thing?"

"Bad," Tazu said, but he smiled, and so did God, and Haghag laughed.

"And what have you to ask, son?"

"Can I have a new bath maid because Kig washes my head too hard?"

"If you have a new bath maid where will Kig go?"

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"Away."

"This is her house. What if you asked Kig to wash your head more gently?"

Tazu looked unhappy, but God said, "Ask her, son." Tazu mumbled something to Kig, who dropped on her knees and thumbed her forehead. But she grinned the whole time. Her fearlessness made me envious. I whispered to Haghag, "If I forgot a question to ask can I ask if I can ask it?"

"Maybe," said Haghag, and thumbed her forehead to God for permission to speak, and when God nodded, Haghag said, "The daughter of God asks if she may ask a question."

"Better to do a thing at the time for doing it," God said, "but you may ask, daughter."

I rushed into the question, forgetting to thank her. "I wanted to know why I can't marry Tazu and Omimo both, because they're both my brothers."

Everybody looked at God, and seeing her smile a little, they all laughed, some of them loudly. My ears burned and my heart thumped.

"Do you want to marry all your brothers, child?"

"No, only Tazu and Omimo."

"Is Tazu not enough?"

Again they all laughed, especially the men. I saw Ruaway staring at us as if she thought we were all crazy.

"Yes, Lady Mother, but Omimo is older and bigger."

Now the laughter was even louder, but I had stopped caring, since God was not displeased. She looked at me thoughtfully and said, "Understand, my daughter. Our eldest son will be a soldier. That's his road. He'll serve God, fighting barbarians and rebels. The day he was born, a tidal wave destroyed the towns of the outer coast. So his name is Babam Omimo, Lord Drowning. Disaster serves God, but is not God."

I knew that was the end of the answer, and thumbed my forehead. I kept thinking about it after God left. It explained many things. All the same, even if he had been born with a bad omen, Omimo was handsome, and nearly a man, and Tazu was a baby that had tantrums. I was glad it would be a long time till we were married.

I remember that birthday because of the question I asked. I remember another birthday because of Ruaway. It must have been a year or two later.

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I ran into the water room to piss and saw her hunched up next to the water tank, almost hidden.

"What are you doing there?" I said, loud and hard, because I was startled. Ruaway shrank and said nothing. I saw her clothes were torn and there was blood dried in her hair.

"You tore your clothes," I said.

When she didn't answer, I lost patience and shouted, "Answer me! Why don't you talk?"

"Have mercy," Ruaway whispered so low I had to guess what she said.

"You talk all wrong when you do talk. What's wrong with you? Are they animals where you come from? You talk like an animal, brr-grr, grr-gra! Are you an idiot?"

When Ruaway said nothing, I pushed her with my foot. She looked up then and I saw not fear but killing in her eyes. That made me like her better. I hated people who were afraid of me. "Talk!" I said. "Nobody can hurt you. God the Father put his penis in you when he was conquering your country, so you're a holy woman. Lady Clouds told me. So what are you hiding for?"

Ruaway showed her teeth and said, "Can hurt me." She showed me places on her head where there was dried blood and fresh blood. Her arms were darkened with bruises.

"Who hurt you?"

"Holy women," she said with a snarl.

"Kig? Omery? Lady Sweetness?"

She nodded her body at each name.

"They're shit," I said. "I'll tell God Herself."

"No tell," Ruaway whispered. "Poison."

I thought about it and understood. The girls hurt her because she was a stranger, powerless. But if she got them in trouble they would cripple or kill her. Most of the barbarian holy women in our house were lame, or blind, or had had root-poison put in their food so that their skin was scabbed with purplish sores.

"Why don't you talk right, Ruaway?"

She said nothing.

"You still don't know how to talk?"

She looked up at me and suddenly said a whole long speech I did not

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understand. "How I talk," she said at the end, still looking at me, right in the eyes. That was nice; I liked it. Mostly I saw only eyelids. Ruaway's eyes were clear and beautiful, though her face was dirty and blood-smeared.

"But it doesn't mean anything," I said.

"Not here."

"Where does it mean anything?"

Ruaway said some more gra-gra and then said, "My people."

"Your people are Teghs. They fight God and get beaten."

"Maybe," Ruaway said, sounding like Haghag. Her eyes looked into mine again, without killing in them but without fear. Nobody looked at me, except Haghag and Tazu and of course God. Everybody else put their forehead on their thumbs so I couldn't tell what they were thinking. I wanted to keep Ruaway with me, but if I favored her, Kig and the others would torment and hurt her. I remembered that when Lord Festival began sleeping with Lady Pin, the men who had insulted Lady Pin became oily and sugary with her and the bodymaids stopped stealing her earrings. I said, "Sleep with me tonight," to Ruaway.

She looked stupid.

"But wash first," I said.

She still looked stupid.

"I don't have a penis!" I said, impatient with her. "If we sleep together Kig will be afraid to touch you."

After a while Ruaway reached out and took my hand and put her forehead against the back of it. It was like thumbing the forehead only it took two people to do it. I liked that. Ruaway's hand was warm, and I could feel the feather of her eyelashes on my hand.

"Tonight," I said. "You understand?" I had understood that Ruaway didn't always understand. Ruaway nodded her body, and I ran off.

I knew nobody could stop me from doing anything, being God's only daughter, but there was nothing I could do except what I was supposed to do, because everybody in the house of God knew everything I did. If sleeping with Ruaway was a thing I wasn't supposed to do, I couldn't do it. Haghag would tell me. I went to her and asked her.

Haghag scowled. "Why do you want that woman in your bed? She's a dirty barbarian. She has lice. She can't even talk."

Haghag was saying yes. She was jealous. I came and stroked her hand

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and said, "When I'm God I'll give you a room full of gold and jewels and dragon crests."

"You are my gold and jewels, little holy daughter," Haghag said.

Haghag was only a common person, but all the holy men and women in God's house, relatives of God or people touched by God, had to do what Haghag said. The nurse of God's children was always a common person, chosen by God Herself. Haghag had been chosen to be Omimo's nurse when her own children were grown up, so when I first remember her she was quite old. She was always the same, with strong hands and a soft voice, saying, "Maybe." She liked to laugh and eat. We were in her heart, and she was in mine. I thought I was her favorite, but when I told her so she said, "After Didi." Didi is what the idiot called himself. I asked her why he was deepest in her heart and she said, "Because he's foolish. And you because you're wise," she said, laughing at me because I was jealous of Lord Idiot.

So now I said, "You fill my heart," and she, knowing it, said hmph.

I think I was eight that year. Ruaway had been thirteen when God the Father put his penis into her after killing her father and mother in the war with her people. That made her sacred, so she had to come live in God's house. If she had conceived, the priests would have strangled her after she had the baby, and the baby would have been nursed by a common woman for two years and then brought back to God's house and trained to be a holy woman, a servant of God. Most of the bodyservants were God's bastards. Such people were holy, but had no title. Lords and ladies were God's relations, descendants of the ancestors of God. God's children were called lord and lady too, except the two who were betrothed. We were just called Tazu and Ze until we became God. My name is what the divine mother is called, the name of the sacred plant that feeds the people of God. Tazu means "great root," because when he was being born our father drinking smoke in the childbirth rituals saw a big tree blown over by a storm, and its roots held thousands of jewels in their fingers.

When God saw things in the shrine or in sleep, with the eyes in the back of their head, they told the dream priests. The priests would ponder these sights and say whether the oracle foretold what would happen or told what should be done or not done. But never had the priests seen the same things God saw, together with God, until the birthday of the world that made me fourteen years old and Tazu eleven.

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Now, in these years, when the sun stands still over Mount Kanaghadwa people still call it the birthday of the world and count themselves a year older, but they no longer know and do all the rituals and ceremonies, the dances and songs, the blessings; and there is no feasting in the streets, now.

All my life used to be rituals, ceremonies, dances, songs, blessings, lessons, feasts, and rules. I knew and I know now on which day of God's year the first perfect ear of ze is to be brought by an angel from the ancient field up by Wadana where God set the first seed of the ze. I knew and know whose hand is to thresh it, and whose hand is to grind the grain, and whose lips are to taste the meal, at what hour, in what room of the house of God, with what priests officiating. There were a thousand rules, but they only seem complicated when I write them here. We knew them and followed them and only thought about them when we were learning them or when they were broken.

I had slept all these years with Ruaway in my bed. She was warm and comfortable. When she began to sleep with me I stopped having bad sights at night as I used to do, seeing huge white clouds whirling in the dark, and toothed mouths of animals, and strange faces that came and changed themselves. When Kig and the other ill-natured holy people saw Ruaway stay in my bedroom with me every night, they dared not lay a finger or a breath on her. Nobody was allowed to touch me except my family and Haghag and the bodyservants, unless I told them to. And after I was ten, the punishment for touching me was death. All the rules had their uses.

The feast after the birthday of the world used to go on for four days and nights. All the storehouses were open and people could take what they needed. The servants of God served out food and beer in the streets and squares of the city of God and every town and village of God's country, and common people and holy people ate together. The lords and ladies and God's sons went down into the streets to join the feast; only God and I did not. God came out on the balcony of the house to hear the histories and see the dances, and I came with them. Singing and dancing priests entertained everyone in the Glittering Square, and drumming priests, and story priests, and history priests. Priests were common people, but what they did was holy.

But before the feast, there were many days of rituals, and on the day

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itself, as the sun stopped above the right shoulder of Kanaghadwa, God Himself danced the Dance that Turns, to bring the year back round.

He wore a gold belt and the gold sun mask, and danced in front of our house on the Glittering Square, which is paved with stones full of mica that flash and sparkle in the sunlight. We children were on the long south balcony to see God dance.

Just as the dance was ending a cloud came across the sun as it stood still over the right shoulder of the mountain, one cloud in the clear blue summer sky. Everybody looked up as the light dimmed. The glittering died out of the stones. All the people in the city made a sound, "Oh," drawing breath. God Himself did not look up, but his step faltered.

He made the last turns of the dance and went into the ash-house, where all the Goïz are in the walls, with the bowls where their food is burned in front of each of them, full of ashes.

There the dream priests were waiting for him, and God Herself had lighted the herbs to make the smoke to drink. The oracle of the birthday was the most important one of the year. Everybody waited in the squares and streets and on the balconies for the priests to come out and tell what God Himself had seen over his shoulder and interpret it to guide us in the new year. After that the feasting would begin.

Usually it took till evening or night for the smoke to bring the seeing and for God to tell it to the priests and for them to interpret it and tell us. People were settling down to wait indoors or in shady places, for when the cloud had passed it became very hot. Tazu and Arzi and the idiot and I stayed out on the long balcony with Haghag and some of the lords and ladies, and Omimo, who had come back from the army for the birthday.

He was a grown man now, tall and strong. After the birthday he was going east to command the army making war on the Tegh and Chasi peoples. He had hardened the skin of his body the way soldiers did by rubbing it with stones and herbs until it was thick and tough as the leather of a ground-dragon, almost black, with a dull shine. He was handsome, but I was glad now that I was to marry Tazu not him. An ugly man looked out of his eyes.

He made us watch him cut his arm with his knife to show how the thick skin was cut deep yet did not bleed. He kept saying he was going to cut Tazu's arm to show how quickly Tazu would bleed. He boasted about

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being a general and slaughtering barbarians. He said things like, "I'll walk across the river on their corpses. I'll drive them into the jungles and burn the jungles down." He said the Tegh people were so stupid they called a flying lizard God. He said that they let their women fight in wars, which was such an evil thing that when he captured such women he would cut open their bellies and trample their wombs. I said nothing. I knew Ruaway's mother had been killed fighting beside her father. They had led a small army which God Himself had easily defeated. God made war on the barbarians not to kill them but to make them people of God, serving and sharing like all people in God's country. I knew no other good reason for war. Certainly Omimo's reasons were not good.

Since Ruaway slept with me she had learned to speak well, and also I learned some words of the way she talked. One of them was techeg. Words like it are: companion, fights-beside-me, countrywoman or countryman, desired, lover, known-a-long-time; of all our words the one most like techeg is our word in-my-heart. Their name Tegh was the same word as techeg; it meant they were all in one another's heart. Ruaway and I were in each other's heart. We were techeg.

Ruaway and I were silent when Omimo said, "The Tegh are filthy insects. I'll crush them."

"Ogga! ogga! ogga!" the idiot said, imitating Omimo's boastful voice. I burst out laughing. In that moment, as I laughed at my brother, the doors of the ash house flew open wide and all the priests hurried out, not in procession with music, but in a crowd, wild, disordered, crying out aloud —

"The house burns and falls!"

"The world dies!"

"God is blind!"

There was a moment of terrible silence in the city and then people began to wail and call out in the streets and from the balconies.

God came out of the ash house, Herself first, leading Himself, who walked as if drunk and sun-dazzled, as people walk after drinking smoke. God came among the staggering, crying priests and silenced them. Then she said, "Hear what I have seen coming behind me, my people!"

In the silence he began speaking in a weak voice. We could not hear all his words, but she said them again in a clear voice after he said them: "God's house falls down to the ground burning, but is not consumed. It

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stands by the river. God is white as snow. God's face has one eye in the center. The great stone roads are broken. War is in the east and north. Famine is in the west and south. The world dies."

He put his face in his hands and wept aloud. She said to the priests, "Say what God has seen!"

They repeated the words God had said.

She said, "Go tell these words in the quarters of the city and to God's angels, and let the angels go out into all the country to tell the people what God has seen."

The priests put their foreheads to their thumbs and obeyed.

When Lord Idiot saw God weeping, he became so distressed and frightened that he pissed, making a pool on the balcony. Haghag, terribly upset, scolded and slapped him. He roared and sobbed. Omimo shouted that a foul woman who struck God's son should be put to death. Haghag fell on her face in Lord Idiot's pool of urine to beg mercy. I told her to get up and be forgiven. I said, "I am God's daughter and I forgive you," and I looked at Omimo with eyes that told him he could not speak. He did not speak.

When I think of that day, the day the world began dying, I think of the trembling old woman standing there sodden with urine, while the people down in the square looked up at us.

Lady Clouds sent Lord Idiot off with Haghag to be bathed, and some of the lords took Tazu and Arzi off to lead the feasting in the city streets. Arzi was crying and Tazu was keeping from crying. Omimo and I stayed among the holy people on the balcony, watching what happened down in Glittering Square. God had gone back into the ash house, and the angels had gathered to repeat together their message, which they would carry word for word, relay by relay, to every town and village and farm of God's country, running day and night on the great stone roads.

All that was as it should be; but the message the angels carried was not as it should be.

Sometimes when the smoke is thick and strong the priests also see things over their shoulder as God does. These are lesser oracles. But never before had they all seen the same thing God saw, speaking the same words God spoke.

And they had not interpreted or explained the words. There was no guidance in them. They brought no understanding, only fear.

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But Omimo was excited: "War in the east and north," he said. "My war!" He looked at me, no longer sneering or sullen, but right at me, eye in eye, the way Ruaway looked at me. He smiled. "Maybe the idiots and crybabies will die," he said. "Maybe you and I will be God." He spoke low, standing close to me, so no one else heard. My heart gave a great leap. I said nothing.

SOON AFTER that birthday, Omimo went back to lead the army on the eastern border.

All year long people waited for our house, God's house in the center of the city, to be struck by lightning, though not destroyed, since that is how the priests interpreted the oracle once they had time to talk and think about it. When the seasons went on and there was no lightning or fire, they said the oracle meant that the sun shining on the gold and copper roof-gutters was the unconsuming fire, and that if there was an earthquake the house would stand.

The words about God being white and having one eye they interpreted as meaning that God was the sun and was to be worshipped as the all-seeing giver of light and life. This had always been so.

There was war in the east, indeed. There had always been war in the east, where people coming out of the wilderness tried to steal our grain, and we conquered them and taught them how to grow it. General Lord Drowning sent angels back with news of his conquests all the way to the Fifth River.

There was no famine in the west. There had never been famine in God's country. God's children saw to it that crops were properly sown and grown and saved and shared. If the ze failed in the western lands, our carters pulled two-wheeled carts laden with grain on the great stone roads over the mountains from the central lands. If crops failed in the north, the carts went north from the Four Rivers land. From west to east carts came laden with smoked fish, from the Sunrise peninsula they came west with fruit and seaweed. The granaries and storehouses of God were always stocked and open to people in need. They had only to ask the administrators of the stores; what was needed was given. No one went hungry. Famine was a word that belonged to those we had brought into our land, people like the Tegh, the Chasi, the North Hills people. The hungry people, we called them.

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The birthday of the world came again, and the most fearful words of the oracle — *the world dies* — were remembered. In public the priests rejoiced and comforted the common people, saying that God's mercy had spared the world. In our house there was little comfort. We all knew that God Himself was ill. He had hidden himself away more and more throughout the year, and many of the ceremonies took place without the divine presence, or only Herself was there. She seemed always quiet and untroubled. My lessons were mostly with her now, and with her I always felt that nothing had changed or could change and all would be well.

God danced the Dance that Turns as the sun stood still above the shoulder of the sacred mountain. He danced slowly, missing many steps. He went into the ash house. We waited, everybody waited, all over the city, all over the country. The sun went down behind Kanaghadwa. All the snow peaks of the mountains from north to south, Kayewa, burning Korosi, Aghet, Enni, Aziza, Kanaghadwa, burned gold, then fiery red, then purple. The light went up them and went out, leaving them white as ashes. The stars came out above them. Then at last the drums beat and the music sounded down in the Glittering Square, and torches made the pavement sparkle and gleam. The priests came out of the narrow doors of the ash house in order, in procession. They stopped. In the silence the oldest dream priest said in her thin, clear voice, "Nothing was seen over the shoulder of God."

Onto the silence ran a buzzing and whispering of people's voices, like little insects running over sand. That died out.

The priests turned and went back into the ash house in procession, in due order, in silence.

The ranks of angels waiting to carry the words of the oracle to the countryside stood still while their captains spoke in a group. Then the angels all moved away in groups by the five streets that start at the Glittering Square and lead to the five great stone roads that go out from the city across the lands. As always before, when the angels entered the streets they began to run, to carry God's word swiftly to the people. But they had no word to carry.

Tazu came to stand beside me on the balcony. He was twelve years old that day. I was fifteen.

He said, "Ze, may I touch you?"

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I looked yes, and he put his hand in mine. That was comforting. Tazu was a serious, silent person. He tired easily, and often his head and eyes hurt so badly he could hardly see, but he did all the ceremonies and sacred acts faithfully, and studied with our teachers of history and geography and archery and dancing and writing, and with our mother studied the sacred knowledge, learning to be God. Some of our lessons he and I did together, helping each other. He was a kind brother and we were in each other's heart.

As he held my hand he said, "Ze, I think we'll be married soon."

I knew what his thoughts were. God our father had missed many steps of the dance that turns the world. He had seen nothing over his shoulder, looking into the time to come.

But what I thought in that moment was how strange it was that in the same place on the same day one year it was Omimo who said we should be married, and the next year it was Tazu.

"Maybe," I said. I held his hand tight, knowing he was frightened at being God. So was I. But there was no use being afraid. When the time came, we would be God.

If the time came. Maybe the sun had not stopped and turned back above the peak of Kanaghadwa. Maybe God had not turned the year.

Maybe there would be no more time — no time coming behind our backs, only what lay before us, only what we could see with mortal eyes. Only our own lives and nothing else.

That was so terrible a thought that my breath stopped and I shut my eyes, squeezing Tazu's thin hand, holding on to him, till I could steady my mind with the thought that there was still no use being afraid.

This year past, Lord Idiot's testicles had ripened at last, and he had begun trying to rape women. After he hurt a young holy girl and attacked others, God had him castrated. Since then he had been quiet again, though he often looked sad and lonely. Seeing Tazu and me holding hands, he seized Arzi's hand and stood beside him as Tazu and I were standing. "God, God!" he said, smiling with pride. But Arzi, who was nine, pulled his hand away and said, "You won't ever be God, you can't be, you're an idiot, you don't know anything!" Old Haghag scolded Arzi wearily and bitterly. Arzi did not cry, but Lord Idiot did, and Haghag had tears in her eyes.

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The sun went north as in any year, as if God had danced the steps of the dance rightly. And on the dark day of the year, it turned back southward behind the peak of great Enni, as in any year. On that day, God Himself was dying, and Tazu and I were taken in to see him and be blessed. He lay all gone to bone in a smell of rot and sweet herbs burning. God my mother lifted his hand and put it on my head, then on Tazu's, while we knelt by the great bed of leather and bronze with our thumbs to our foreheads. She said the words of blessing. God my father said nothing, until he whispered, "Ze, Ze!" He was not calling to me. The name of God Herself is always Ze. He was calling to his sister and wife while he died.

Two nights later I woke in darkness. The deep drums were beating all through the house. I heard other drums begin to beat in the temples of worship and the squares farther away in the city, and then others yet farther away. In the countryside under the stars they would hear those drums and begin to beat their own drums, up in the hills, in the mountain passes and over the mountains to the western sea, across the fields eastward, across the four great rivers, from town to town clear to the wilderness. That same night, I thought, my brother Omimo in his camp under the North Hills would hear the drums saying God is dead.

A SON AND DAUGHTER OF GOD, marrying, became God. This marriage could not take place till God's death, but always it took place within a few hours, so that the world would not be long bereft. I knew this from all we had been taught. It was ill fate that my mother delayed my marriage to Tazu. If we had been married at once, Omimo's claim would have been useless; not even his soldiers would have dared follow him. In her grief she was distraught. And she did not know or could not imagine the measure of Omimo's ambition, driving him to violence and sacrilege.

Informed by the angels of our father's illness, he had for days been marching swiftly westward with a small troop of loyal soldiers. When the drums beat, he heard them not in the far North Hills, but in the fortress on the hill called Ghari that stands north across the valley in sight of the city and the house of God.

The preparations for burning the body of the man who had been God

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were going forward; the ash priests saw to that. Preparations for our wedding should have been going forward at the same time, but our mother, who should have seen to them, did not come out of her room.

Her sister Lady Clouds and other lords and ladies of the household talked of the wedding hats and garlands, of the music priests who should come to play, of the festivals that should be arranged in the city and the villages. The marriage priest came anxiously to them, but they dared do nothing and he dared do nothing until my mother allowed them to act. Lady Clouds knocked at her door but she did not answer. They were so nervous and uneasy, waiting for her all day long, that I thought I would go mad staying with them. I went down into the garden court to walk.

I had never been farther outside the walls of our house than the balconies. I had never walked across the Glittering Square into the streets of the city. I had never seen a field or a river. I had never walked on dirt.

God's sons were carried in litters into the streets to the temples for rituals, and in summer after the birthday of the world they were always taken up into the mountains to Chimlu, where the world began, at the springs of the River of Origin. Every year when he came back from there, Tazu would tell me about Chimlu, how the mountains went up all around the ancient house there, and wild dragons flew from peak to peak. There God's sons hunted dragons and slept under the stars. But the daughter of God must keep the house.

The garden court was in my heart. It was where I could walk under the sky. It had five fountains of peaceful water, and flowering trees in great pots; plants of sacred ze grew against the sunniest wall in containers of copper and silver. All my life, when I had a time free of ceremonies and lessons, I went there. When I was little, I pretended the insects there were dragons and hunted them. Later I played throwbone with Ruaway, or sat and watched the water of the fountains well and fall, well and fall, till the stars came out in the sky above the walls.

This day as always, Ruaway came with me. Since I could not go anywhere alone but must have a companion, I had asked God Herself to make her my chief companion.

I sat down by the center fountain. Ruaway knew I wanted silence and went off to the corner under the fruit trees to wait. She could sleep anywhere at any time. I sat thinking how strange it would be to have Tazu

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always as my companion, day and night, instead of Ruaway. But I could not make my thoughts real.

The garden court had a door that opened on the street. Sometimes when the gardeners opened it to let each other in and out, I had looked out of it to see the world outside my house. The door was always locked on both sides, so that two people had to open it. As I sat by the fountain, I saw a man who I thought was a gardener cross the court and unbolt the door. Several men came in. One was my brother Omimo.

I think that door had been only his way to come secretly into the house. I think he had planned to kill Tazu and Arzi so that I would have to marry him. That he found me there in the garden as if waiting for him was the chance of that time, the fate that was on us.

"Ze!" he said as he came past the fountain where I sat. His voice was like my father's voice calling to my mother.

"Lord Drowning," I said, standing up. I was so bewildered that I said, "You're not here!" I saw that he had been wounded. His right eye was closed with a scar.

He stood still, staring at me from his one eye, and said nothing, getting over his own surprise. Then he laughed.

"No, sister," he said, and turning to his men gave them orders. There were five of them, I think, soldiers, with hardened skin all over their bodies. They wore angel's shoes on their feet, and belts around their waists and necks to support the sheaths for their penis and sword and daggers. Omimo looked like them, but with gold sheaths and the silver hat of a general. I did not understand what he said to the men. They came close to me, and Omimo came closer, so that I said, "Don't touch me," to warn them of their danger, for common men who touched me would be burned to death by the priests of the law, and even Omimo if he touched me without my permission would have to do penance and fast for a year. But he laughed again, and as I drew away, he took hold of my arm suddenly, putting his hand over my mouth. I bit down as hard as I could on his hand. He pulled it away and then slapped it again so hard on my mouth and nose that my head fell back and I could not breathe. I struggled and fought, but my eyes kept seeing blackness and flashes. I felt hard hands holding me, twisting my arms, pulling me up in the air, carrying me, and the hand on my mouth and nose tightened its grip till I could not breathe at all.

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Ruaway had been drowsing under the trees, lying on the pavement among the big pots. They did not see her, but she saw them. She knew at once if they saw her they would kill her. She lay still. As soon as they had carried me out the gate into the street, she ran into the house to my mother's room and threw open the door. This was sacrilege, but, not knowing who in the household might be in sympathy with Omimo, she could trust only my mother.

"Lord Drowning has carried Ze off," she said. She told me later that my mother sat there silent and desolate in the dark room for so long that Ruaway thought she had not heard. She was about to speak again, when my mother stood up. Grief fell away from her. She said, "We cannot trust the army," her mind leaping at once to see what must be done, for she was one who had been God. "Bring Tazu here," she said to Ruaway.

Ruaway found Tazu among the holy people, called him to her with her eyes, and asked him to go to his mother at once. Then she went out of the house by the garden door that still stood unlocked and unwatched. She asked people in the Glittering Square if they had seen some soldiers with a drunken girl. Those who had seen us told her to take the northeast street. And so little time had passed that when she came out the northern gate of the city she saw Omimo and his men climbing the hill road toward Ghari, carrying me up to the old fort. She ran back to tell my mother this.

Consulting with Tazu and Lady Clouds and those people she most trusted, my mother sent for several old generals of the peace, whose soldiers served to keep order in the countryside, not in war on the frontiers. She asked for their obedience, which they promised her, for though she was not God she had been God, and was daughter and mother of God. And there was no one else to obey.

She talked next with the dream priests, deciding with them what messages the angels should carry to the people. There was no doubt that Omimo had carried me off to try to make himself God by marrying me. If my mother announced first, in the voices of the angels, that his act was not a marriage performed by the marriage priest, but was rape, then it might be the people would not believe he and I were God.

So the news went out on swift feet, all over the city and the countryside.

Omimo's army, now following him west as fast as they could march,

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were loyal to him. Some other soldiers joined him along the way. Most of the peacekeeping soldiers of the center land supported my mother. She named Tazu their general. He and she put up a brave and resolute front, but they had little true hope, for there was no God, nor could there be so long as Omimo had me in his power to rape or kill.

All this I learned later. What I saw and knew was this: I was in a low room without windows in the old fortress. The door was locked from outside. Nobody was with me and no guards were at the door, since nobody was in the fort but Omimo's soldiers. I waited there not knowing if it was day or night. I thought time had stopped, as I had feared it would. There was no light in the room, an old store-room under the pavement of the fortress. Creatures moved on the dirt floor. I walked on dirt then. I sat on dirt and lay on it.

The bolt of the door was shot. Torches flaring in the doorway dazzled me. Men came in and stuck a torch in the sconce on the wall. Omimo came through them to me. His penis stood upright and he came to me to rape me. I spat in his half-blind face and said, "If you touch me your penis will burn like that torch!" He showed his teeth as if he was laughing. He pushed me down and pushed my legs apart, but he was shaking, frightened of my sacred being. He tried to push his penis into me with his hands but it had gone soft. He could not rape me. I said, "You can't, look, you can't rape me!"

His soldiers watched and heard all this. In his humiliation, Omimo pulled his sword from its gold sheath to kill me, but the soldiers held his hands, preventing him, saying, "Lord, Lord, don't kill her, she must be God with you!" Omimo shouted and fought them as I had fought him, and so they all went out, shouting and struggling with him. One of them seized the torch, and the door clashed behind them. After a little while I felt my way to the door and tried it, thinking they might have forgotten to bolt it, but it was bolted. I crawled back to the corner where I had been and lay on the dirt in the dark.

Truly we were all on the dirt in the dark. There was no God. God was the son and daughter of God joined in marriage by the marriage priest. There was no other. There was no other way to go. Omimo did not know what way to go, what to do. He could not marry me without the marriage priest's words. He thought by raping me he would be my husband, and

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maybe it would have been so: but he could not rape me. I made him impotent.

The only thing he saw to do was attack the city, take the house of God and its priests captive, and force the marriage priest to say the words that made God. He could not do this with the small force he had with him, so he waited for his army to come from the east.

Tazu and the generals and my mother gathered soldiers into the city from the center land. They did not try to attack Ghari. It was a strong fort, easy to defend, hard to attack, and they feared that if they besieged it, they would be caught between it and Omimo's great army coming from the east.

So the soldiers that had come with him, about two hundred of them, garrisoned the fort. As the days passed, Omimo provided women for them. It was the policy of God to give village women extra grain or tools or crop-rows for going to fuck with the soldiers at army camps and stations. There were always women glad to oblige the soldiers and take the reward, and if they got pregnant of course they received more reward and support. Seeking to ease and placate his men, Omimo sent officers down to offer gifts to girls in the villages near Ghari. A group of girls agreed to come; for the common people understood very little of the situation, not believing that anyone could revolt against God. With these village women came Ruaway.

The women and girls ran about the fort, teasing and playing with the soldiers off duty. Ruaway found where I was by fate and courage, coming down into the dark passages under the pavement and trying the doors of the storerooms. I heard the bolt move in the lock. She said my name. I made some sound. "Come!" she said. I crawled to the door. She took my arm and helped me stand and walk. She shot the bolt shut again, and we felt our way down the black passage till we saw light flicker on stone steps. We came out into a torchlit courtyard full of girls and soldiers. Ruaway at once began to run through them, giggling and chattering nonsense, holding tight to my arm so that I ran with her. A couple of soldiers grabbed at us, but Ruaway dodged them, saying, "No, no, Tuki's for the Captain!" We ran on, and came to the side gate, and Ruaway said to the guards, "Oh, let us out, Captain, Captain, I have to take her back to her mother, she's vomiting sick with fever!" I was staggering and covered with dirt and filth

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from my prison. The guards laughed at me and said foul words about my foulness and opened the gate a crack to let us out. And we ran on down the hill in the starlight.

To escape from a prison so easily, to run through locked doors, people have said, I must have been God indeed. But there was no God then, as there is none now. Long before God, and long after also, is the way things are, which we call chance, or luck, or fortune, or fate; but those are only names.

And there is courage. Ruaway freed me because I was in her heart.

As soon as we were out of sight of the guards at the gate we left the road, on which there were sentries, and cut across country to the city. It stood mightily on the great slope before us, its stone walls starlit. I had never seen it except from the windows and balconies of the house at the center of it.

I had never walked far, and though I was strong from the exercises I did as part of our lessons, my soles were as tender as my palms. Soon I was grunting and tears kept starting in my eyes from the shocks of pain from rocks and gravel underfoot. I found it harder and harder to breathe. I could not run. But Ruaway kept hold of my hand, and we went on.

We came to the north gate, locked and barred and heavily guarded by soldiers of the peace. Then Ruaway cried out, "Let God's daughter enter the city of God!"

I put back my hair and held myself up straight, though my lungs were full of knives, and said to the captain of the gate, "Lord Captain, take us to my mother Lady Ze in the house in the center of the world."

He was old General Rire's son, a man I knew, and he knew me. He stared at me once, then quickly thumbed his forehead, and roared out orders, and the gates opened. So we went in and walked the northeast street to my house, escorted by soldiers, and by more and more people shouting in joy. The drums began to beat, the high, fast beat of the festivals.

That night my mother held me in her arms, as she had not done since I was a suckling baby.

That night Tazu and I stood under the garland before the marriage priest and drank from the sacred cups and were married into God.

That night also Omimo, finding I was gone, ordered a death priest of

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the army to marry him to one of the village girls who came to fuck with the soldiers. Since nobody outside my house, except a few of his men, had ever seen me up close, any girl could pose as me. Most of his soldiers believed the girl was me. He proclaimed that he had married the daughter of the Dead God and that she and he were now God. As we sent out angels to tell of our marriage, so he sent runners to say that the marriage in the house of God was false, since his sister Ze had run away with him and married him at Ghari, and she and he were now the one true God. And he showed himself to the people wearing a gold hat, with white paint on his face, and his blinded eye, while the army priests cried out, "Behold! The oracle is fulfilled! God is white and has one eye!"

Some believed his priests and messengers. More believed ours. But all were distressed or frightened or made angry by hearing messengers proclaim two Gods at one time, so that instead of knowing the truth, they had to choose to believe.

Omimo's great army was now only four or five days' march away.

Angels came to us saying that a young general, Mesiwa, was bringing a thousand soldiers of the peace up from the rich coasts south of the city. He told the angels only that he came to fight for "the one true God." We feared that meant Omimo. For we added no words to our name, since the word itself means the only truth, or else it means nothing.

We were wise in our choice of generals, and decisive in acting on their advice. Rather than wait for the city to be besieged, we resolved to send a force to attack the eastern army before it reached Ghari, meeting it in the foothills above the River of Origin. We would have to fall back as their full strength came up, but we could strip the country as we did so, and bring the country people into the city. Meanwhile we sent carts to and from all the storehouses on the southern and western roads to fill the city's granaries. If the war did not end quickly, said the old generals, it would be won by those who could keep eating.

"Lord Drowning's army can feed themselves from the storehouses along the east and north roads," said my mother, who attended all our councils.

"Destroy the roads," Tazu said.

I heard my mother's breath catch, and remembered the oracle: The roads will be broken.

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"That would take as long to do as it took to make them," said the oldest general, but the next oldest general said, "Break down the stone bridge at Almoghay." And so we ordered. Retreating from its delaying battle, our army tore down the great bridge that had stood a thousand years. Omimo's army had to go round nearly a hundred miles farther, through forests, to the ford at Domi, while our army and our carters brought the contents of the storehouses in to the city. Many country people followed them, seeking the protection of God, and so the city grew very full. Every grain of ze came with a mouth to eat it.

All this time Mesiwa, who might have come against the eastern army at Domi, waited in the passes with his thousand men. When we commanded him to come help punish sacrilege and restore peace, he sent our angel back with meaningless messages. It seemed certain that he was in league with Omimo. "Mesiwa the finger, Omimo the thumb," said the oldest general, pretending to crack a louse.

"God is not mocked," Tazu said to him, deadly fierce. The old general bowed his forehead down on his thumbs, abashed. But I was able to smile.

Tazu had hoped the country people would rise up in anger at the sacrilege and strike the Painted God down. But they were not soldiers and had never fought. They had always lived under the protection of the soldiers of peace and under our care. As if our doings now were like the whirlwind or the earthquake, they were paralyzed by them and could only watch and wait till they were over, hoping to survive. Only the people of our household, whose livelihood depended directly upon us and whose skills and knowledge were at our service, and the people of the city in whose heart we were, and the soldiers of the peace, would fight for us.

The country people had believed in us. Where no belief is, no God is. Where doubt is, foot falters and hand will not take hold.

The wars at the borders, the wars of conquest, had made our land too large. The people in the towns and villages knew no more who I was than I knew who they were. In the days of the origin, Babam Kerul and Bamam Ze came down from the mountain and walked the fields of the center lands beside the common people. The common people who laid the first stones of the great roads and the huge base stones of the old city wall had known the face of their God, seeing it daily.

After I spoke of this to our councils, Tazu and I went out into the

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streets, sometimes carried in litters, sometimes walking. We were surrounded by the priests and guards who honored our divinity, but we went among the people, meeting their eyes. They fell on their knees and put their foreheads to their thumbs, and many wept when they saw us. They called out from street to street, and little children cried out, "There's God!"

"You walk in their hearts," my mother said.

But Omimo's army had come to the River of Origin, and one day's march brought the vanguard to Ghari.

That evening we stood on the north balcony looking toward Ghari hill, which was swarming with men, as when a nest of insects swarms. To the west the light was dark red on the mountains in their winter snow. From Korosi a vast plume of smoke trailed, blood color.

"Look," Tazu said, pointing northwest. A light flared in the sky, like the sheet lightning of summer. "A falling star," he said, and I said, "An eruption."

In the dark of the night, angels came to us. "A great house burned and fell from the sky," one said, and the other said, "It burned but it stands, on the bank of the river."

"The words of God spoken on the birthday of the world," I said.

The angels knelt down hiding their faces.

WHAT I SAW THEN is not what I see now looking far off to the distant past; what I knew then is both less and more than I know now. I try to say what I saw and knew then.

That morning I saw coming down the great stone road to the northern gate a group of beings, two-legged and erect like people or lizards. They were the height of giant desert lizards, with monstrous limbs and feet, but without tails. They were white all over and hairless. Their heads had no mouth or nose and one huge single staring shining lidless eye.

They stopped outside the gate.

Not a man was to be seen on Ghari Hill. They were all in the fortress or hidden in the woods behind the hill.

We were standing up on the top of the northern gate, where a wall runs chest-high to protect the guards.

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There was a little sound of frightened weeping on the roofs and balconies of the city, and people called out to us, "God! God, save us!"

Tazu and I had talked all night. We listened to what our mother and otherwise people said, and then we sent them away to reach out our minds together, to look over our shoulder into the time that was coming. We saw the death and the birth of the world, that night. We saw all things changed.

The oracle had said that God was white and had one eye. This was what we saw now. The oracle had said that the world died. With it died our brief time of being God. This was what we had to do now: to kill the world. The world must die so that God may live. The house falls that it may stand. Those who have been God must make God welcome.

Tazu spoke welcome to God, while I ran down the spiral stairs inside the wall of the gate and unbolted the great bolts — the guards had to help me — and swung the door open. "Enter in!" I said to God, and put my forehead to my thumbs, kneeling.

They came in, hesitant, moving slowly, ponderously. Each one turned its huge eye from side to side, unblinking. Around the eye was a ring of silver that flashed in the sun. I saw myself in one of those eyes, a pupil in the eye of God.

Their snow-white skin was coarse and wrinkled, with bright tattoos on it. I was dismayed that God could be so ugly.

The guards had shrunk back against the walls. Tazu had come down to stand with me. One of them raised a box toward us. A noise came out of the box, as if some animal was shut in it.

Tazu spoke to them again, telling them that the oracle had foretold their coming, and that we who had been God welcomed God.

They stood there, and the box made more noises. I thought it sounded like Ruaway before she learned to talk right. Was the language of God no longer ours? Or was God an animal, as Ruaway's people believed? I thought they seemed more like the monstrous lizards of the desert that lived in the zoo of our house than they seemed like us.

One raised its thick arm and pointed at our house, down at the end of the street, taller than other houses, its copper gutters and goldleaf carvings shining in the bright winter sunlight.

"Come, Lord," I said, "come to your house." We led them to it and brought them inside.

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When we came into the low, long, windowless audience room, one of them took off its head. Inside it was a head like ours, with two eyes, nose, mouth, ears. The others did the same.

Then, seeing their head was a mask, I saw that their white skin was like a shoe that they wore not just on the foot but all over their body. Inside this shoe they were like us, though the skin of their faces was the color of clay pots and looked very thin, and their hair was shiny and lay flat.

"Bring food and drink," I said to the children of God cowering outside the door, and they ran to bring trays of ze-cakes and dried fruit and winter beer. God came to the tables where the food was set. Some of them pretended to eat. One, watching what I did, touched the ze-cake to its forehead first, and then bit into it and chewed and swallowed. It spoke to the others, gre-gra, gre-gra.

This one was also the first to take off its body-shoe. Inside it other wrappings and coverings hid and protected most of its body, but this was understandable, because even the body skin was pale and terribly thin, soft as a baby's eyelid.

In the audience room, on the east wall over the double seat of God, hung the gold mask which God Himself wore to turn the sun back on its way. The one who had eaten the cake pointed at the mask. Then it looked at me — its own eyes were oval, large, and beautiful — and pointed up to where the sun was in the sky. I nodded my body. It pointed its finger here and there all about the mask, and then all about the ceiling.

"There must be more masks made, because God is now more than two," Tazu said.

I had thought the gesture might signify the stars, but I saw that Tazu's interpretation made more sense.

"We will have masks made," I told God, and then ordered the hat priest to go fetch the gold hats which God wore during ceremonies and festivals. There were many of these hats, some jewelled and ornate, others plain, all very ancient. The hat priest brought them in due order two by two until they were all set out on the great table of polished wood and bronze where the ceremonies of First Ze and Harvest were celebrated.

Tazu took off the gold hat he wore, and I took off mine. Tazu put his hat on the head of the one who had eaten the cake, and I chose a short one and reached up and put my hat on its head. Then, choosing ordinary-day

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hats, not those of the sacred occasions, we put a hat on each of the heads of God, while they stood and waited for us to do so.

Then we knelt bareheaded and put our foreheads against our thumbs.

God stood there. I was sure they did not know what to do. "God is grown, but new, like a baby," I said to Tazu. I was sure they did not understand what we said.

All at once the one I had put my hat on came to me and put its hands on my elbows to raise me up from kneeling. I pulled back at first, not being used to being touched; then I remembered I was no longer very sacred, and let God touch me. It talked and gestured. It gazed into my eyes. It took off the gold hat and tried to put it back on my head. At that I did shrink away, saying, "No, no!" It seemed blasphemy, to say No to God, but I knew better.

God talked among themselves then for a while, and Tazu and our mother and I were able to talk among ourselves. What we understood was this: the oracle had not been wrong, of course, but it had been subtle. God was not truly one-eyed nor blind, but did not know how to see. It was not God's skin that was white, but their mind that was blank and ignorant. They did not know how to talk, how to act, what to do. They did not know their people.

Yet how could Tazu and I, or our mother and our old teachers, teach them? The world had died and a new world was coming to be. Everything in it might be new. Everything might be different. So it was not God, but we, who did not know how to see, what to do, how to speak.

I felt this so strongly that I knelt again and prayed to God, "Teach us!"

They looked at me and talked to each other, brr-grr, gre-gra.

I sent our mother and the others to talk with our generals, for angels had come with reports about Omimo's army. Tazu was very tired from lack of sleep. We two sat down on the floor together and talked quietly. He was concerned about God's seat. "How can they all sit on it at once?" he said.

"They'll have more seats added," I said. "Or now two will sit on it, and then another two. They're all God, the way you and I were, so it doesn't matter."

"But none of them is a woman," Tazu said.

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I looked at God more carefully and saw that he was right. This disturbed me slowly, but very deeply. How could God be only half human?

In my world, a marriage made God. In this world coming to be, what made God?

I thought of Omimo. White clay on his face and a false marriage had made him a false God, but many people believed he was truly God. Would the power of their belief make him God, while we gave our power to this new, ignorant God?

If Omimo found out how helpless they appeared to be, not knowing how to speak, not even knowing how to eat, he would fear their divinity even less than he had feared ours. He would attack. And would our soldiers fight for this God?

I saw clearly that they would not. I saw from the back of my head, with the eyes that see what is coming. I saw the misery that was coming to my people. I saw the world dead, but I did not see it being born. What world could be born of a God who was male? Men do not give birth.

Everything was wrong. It came very strongly into my mind that we should have our soldiers kill God now, while they were still new in the world and weak.

And then? If we killed God there would be no God. We could pretend to be God again, the way Omimo pretended. But godhead is not pretense. Nor is it put on and off like a golden hat.

The world had died. That was fated and foretold. The fate of these strange men was to be God, and they would have to live their fate as we lived ours, finding out what it was to be as it came to be, unless they could see over their shoulders, which is one of the gifts of God.

I stood up again, taking Tazu's hand so that he stood beside me. "The city is yours," I said to them, "and the people are yours. The world is yours, and the war is yours. All praise and glory to you, our God!" And we knelt once more and bowed our foreheads deeply to our thumbs, and left them.

"Where are we going?" Tazu said. He was twelve years old and no longer God. There were tears in his eyes.

"To find Mother and Ruaway," I said, "and Arzi and Lord Idiot and Haghag, and any of our people who want to come with us." I had begun to say "our children," but we were no longer their mother and father.

"Come where?" Tazu said.

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"To Chimlu."

"Up in the mountains? Run and hide? We should stay and fight Omimo."

"What for?" I said.

That was sixty years ago.

I have written this to tell how it was to live in the house of God before the world ended and began again. To tell it I have tried to write with the mind I had then. But neither then nor now do I fully understand the oracle which my father and all the priests saw and spoke. All of it came to pass. Yet we have no God, and no oracles to guide us.

None of the strange men lived a long life, but they all lived longer than Omimo.

We were on the long road up into the mountains when an angel caught up with us to tell us that Mesiwa had joined Omimo, and the two generals had brought their great army against the house of the strangers, which stood like a tower in the fields near Soze River, with a waste of burned earth around it. The strangers warned Omimo and his army clearly to withdraw, sending lightning out of the house over their heads that set distant trees afire. Omimo would not heed. He could prove he was God only by killing God. He commanded his army to rush at the tall house. He and Mesiwa and a hundred men around him were destroyed by a single bolt of lightning. They were burned to ash. His army fled in terror.

"They are God! They are God indeed!" Tazu said when he heard the angel tell us that. He spoke joyfully, for he was as unhappy in his doubt as I was. And for a while we could all believe in them, since they could wield the lightning. Many people called them God as long as they lived.

My belief is that they were not God in any sense of the word I understand, but were otherworldly, supernatural beings, who had great powers, but were weak and ignorant of our world, and soon sickened of it and died.

There were fourteen of them in all. Some of them lived more than ten years. These learned to speak as we do. One of them came up into the mountains to Chimlu, along with some of the pilgrims who still wanted to worship Tazu and me as God. Tazu and I and this man talked for many days, learning from each other. He told us that their house moved in the

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air, flying like a dragon-lizard, but its wings were broken. He told us that in the land they came from the sunlight is very weak, and it was our strong sunlight that made them sick. Though they covered their bodies with weavings, still their thin skins let the sunlight in, and they would all die soon. He told us they were sorry they had come. I said, "You had to come. God saw you coming. What use is it to be sorry?"

He agreed with me that they were not God. He said that God lived in the sky. That seemed to us a useless place for God to live. Tazu said they had indeed been God when they came, since they fulfilled the oracle and changed the world; but now, like us, they were common people.

Ruaway took a liking to this stranger, maybe because she had been a stranger, and when he was at Chimlu they slept together. She said he was like any man under his weavings and coverings. He told her he could not impregnate her, as his seed would not ripen in our earth. Indeed the strangers left no children.

This stranger told us his name, Bin-yi-zin. He came back up to Chimlu several times, and was the last of them to die. He left with Ruaway the dark crystals he wore before his eyes, which make things look larger and clearer for her, though to my eyes they make things dim. To me he gave his own record of his life, in a beautiful writing made of lines of little pictures, which I keep in the box with this writing I make.

When Tazu's testicles ripened we had to decide what to do, for brothers and sisters among the common people do not marry. We asked the priests and they advised us that our marriage being divine could not be unmade, and that though no longer God we were husband and wife. Since we were in each other's heart, this pleased us, and often we slept together. Twice I conceived, but the conceptions aborted, one very early and one in the fourth month, and I did not conceive again. This was a grief to us, and yet fortunate, for had we had children, the people might have tried to make them be God.

It takes a long time to learn to live without God, and some people never do. They would rather have a false God than none at all. All through the years, though seldom now, people would climb up to Chimlu to beg Tazu and me to come back down to the city and be God. And when it became clear that the strangers would not rule the country as God, either under the old rules or with new ones, men began to imitate Omimo,

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marrying ladies of our lineage and claiming to be a new God. They all found followers and they all made wars, fighting each other. None of them had Omimo's terrible courage, or the loyalty of a great army to a successful general. They have all come to wretched ends at the hands of angry, disappointed, wretched people.

For my people and my land have fared no better than I feared and saw over my shoulder on the night the world ended. The great stone roads are not maintained. In places they are already broken. Almoghay bridge was never rebuilt. The granaries and storehouses are empty and falling down. The old and sick must beg from neighbors, and a pregnant girl has only her mother to turn to, and an orphan has no one. There is famine in the west and south. We are the hungry people, now. The angels no longer weave the net of government, and one part of the land knows nothing of the others. They say barbarians have brought back the wilderness across the Fourth River, and ground dragons spawn in the fields of grain. Little generals and painted gods raise armies to waste lives and goods and spoil the sacred earth.

The evil time will not last forever. No time does. I died as God a long time ago. I have lived as a common woman a long time. Each year I see the sun turn back from the south behind great Kanaghadwa. Though God does not dance on the glittering pavement, yet I see the birthday of the world over the shoulder of my death.

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Shelter, by Chaz Brenchley, Hodder & Stoughton, 1999, £16.99.

FROM THE moment you open this book, you are steeped in a mood of darkness and danger, of November frost and cold rain, of high lonely moorlands and dark wet English woods, of deep still waters and gray skies. The landscape and settings are the first real characters, from a smoky pub to the craggy hills. The human characters, when they saunter on stage, are born of that landscape and reflect it. They seem dangerous only when sharing a few drinks, casting shadows of trouble and bravado and fear. Outside of the pubs and their homes, they are diminished, small cogs in an enormous machine.

Rowan Coffey has come home from studying at Cambridge on a scholarship, fleeing the death of a socially inept acquaintance who drowned in a river. A suspect at first, Coffey is freed from suspicion and immediately retreats to the world he knows, the rural valley of his childhood haunts. It's territory he knows well, but also made strange by his mother's stories of the Greenfolk — wild woodland spirits not always amenable to mankind. She's a professional storyteller. Coffey knows they're only stories. And yet...and yet.

But woodland spirits don't change Coffey's familiar world and take away its ability to shelter him from the outside. That begins with the arrival of the Ride, a caravan of nomads that sets up a camp of cars and trucks near his mother's cottage. In short order: the caravan is violently broken up by the police and some of its more militant members go hiding in the woods; an amoral child molester known as Root connects with them; and the guiser, a mysterious and deadly trickster who could have stepped out of one of the tales Coffey's mother tells, arrives in the woods.

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Every time somebody else dies, the finger of guilt always seems to point at Coffey.

Shelter is a dark and impassioned book. You won't necessarily like Coffey — the novel's somewhat self-absorbed first person narrator — but he tells the story so well, in language earthy and evocative, that it seems impossible to turn away. And it's such a fascinating story, growing out of — when it isn't playing against — that resonant landscape and leaving us to shiver with ever-deepening chills.

False Memory, by Dean Koontz, Bantam, 1999, $26.95.

According to a poll I read a few years ago that I like to quote, the number one fear in North Americans is public speaking, followed by death. (Which begs the immediate joke that we'd rather be in the casket than delivering the eulogy.)

I can empathize with both, but would hazard that right up there would be the fear of losing control of one's self. It's why some people won't do drugs or overindulge with alcohol; doing so is giving over control of yourself to the drugs or the drink. And it's why phobias are so frightening.

A phobia is an unreasonable fear. Those afflicted *know* it's unreasonable, yet their reaction will still range from general uneasiness to outright, debilitating terror. Many of us have a vague phobia about heights. But what if you're too afraid to venture out of your own home? (Agoraphobia) Or terrified of insects? (Entomophobia)

False Memory opens with Martie Rhodes discovering she has developed autophobia — a fear of herself. The sight of her own shadow makes her uneasy. Her reflection in a mirror makes her more so. Viewing a sharp implement (a fork, a pair of scissors) sends her into an outright panic attack when she considers what she might do with the object, who she could hurt and how she would do it.

That's a crushing enough discovery. But then she and her husband Dusty realize that the phobia has been planted in her. That the same people who did it have also killed her best friend, have tried to kill Dusty's brother, and have something terrible in mind for all of them.

The only real disappointment with *False Memory* is that it appears when readers were expecting the third and final installment of Koontz's first trilogy. The first two books, *Fear Nothing* and *Seize the Night*, were his last two published

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novels and one might forgive a reader for thinking the third book would immediately follow.

Regular readers of this column might remember that I wasn't overly enthusiastic with *Seize the Night*, but that's often the case with the middle offering of a trilogy. I'm still dying to find out how it all works out.

What happened to the third book? Who knows? But I highly doubt that Koontz simply gave up on the trilogy. I think he did what any good writer will do and that is write the book he had to write now, never mind what the publisher's contract says. This can be a risky business, but a good writer works on what excites him now and damn the consequences. Makes sense, too, since if it excites him, then it has that much better a chance of exciting the reader.

And *False Memory* pays off big time. It's Koontz's longest book in a while, with one of his best casts of engaging (not to mention despicable) characters and an intriguing premise. Or perhaps I should say, it's how that premise impacts upon the characters that's so intriguing. There isn't a dull minute here, from when Rhodes first falls victim to her phobia, through the slow unraveling of the conspiracy behind it, and how she and her small group of friends struggle against it. And if it starts well (it does), by halfway through, the book is next to impossible to put it down.

Given that, I can certainly forgive Koontz making us wait another year before he completes the *Fear Nothing* trilogy.

In the Beginning...Was the Command Line, by Neal Stephenson, Avon, 1999, $10.

We get so used to technological advances nowadays that it's sometimes hard to remember how, only a little more than twenty years ago, computers were huge mainframes, usually found in government offices or at universities. Connecting with them was a laborious process and it certainly wasn't something just anybody could do. (Though at the time, without email and the Internet, the regular joes and jills outside of academia weren't all that interested anyway.)

What Stephenson (the author of such wonderful novels as *Snow Crash* and *Cryptonomicon)* does in this longish essay is talk a bit about the history of the personal computer, how it grew out of those unwieldy mainframes to become the omnipresent fixture it is today.

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I mean, I'm writing this on an HP palmtop while sitting on my couch. Later, I'll sync the palmtop to my principal computer, clean the file up, and email it to my editor who will in turn email suggested changes back to me. It probably won't get to paper until it's actually published, and even then portions are available on-line at the *F&SF* site <www.fsfmag.com>.

We live in an electronic world, an sf world in many ways, and it's fascinating to see how it all came about in such a short time. Stephenson delineates much of that history for us here, compares the various operating systems, and basically sets the record straight as to why the big two (Macintosh and Microsoft) have come to be what they are today.

Does the book sound dry, or only for computer geeks? Hardly. While it's certainly informative, and even eye-opening in places, *In the Beginning...* also had me laughing out loud at some of its analogies. And since I don't doubt that many of the readers of this column use a computer, either at home or the office, or both, I'm sure you'll be able to relate to a great deal of what you'll find here.

And you know, the more I read about Linux, that outlaw maverick of operating systems, the sweeter it sounds....

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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MUSING ON BOOKS

MICHELLE WEST

Tathea, Anne Perry, Shadow Mountain, 1999, $23.95.

Obsidian Butterfly, Laurell K. Hamilton, Ace, 2000, $21.95.

Bios, Robert Charles Wilson, Tor Books, 1999, $22.95.

I LOVED C. S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* as a child. Even discovering that the series was a thinly veiled front for Christian symbolism and theory when I was an unruly teen did not take those books away from me, and I look forward to the day when I can read them with my own children. *The Happy Prince* and *The Selfish Giant*, both by the flamboyant Oscar Wilde, sank hooks into my sentimental heart at a tender age, and again, shouted discourse over the ugly nature of subtext (be good, suffer, die and go to *Christian* heaven) during a very loud and very divided English class did not remove them. I have nothing whatsoever against a subtext that preaches love, duty, honor, and a good death, and you know, if it's attached to someone's moral precept of an afterlife, I'll put up with it. But.

Tathea isn't a fantasy novel. It's certainly heralded as such, but it's really *The Celestine Prophecy* meets the Jehovah's Witness's *Watchtower*. When I started it, I thought it was heavy-handed allegory...but allegory is too subtle a word for the finished product.

Tathea is Empress of Shinabar. The book opens with the assassination of her husband (the Emperor) and her small son, her rescue from a similar fate, and her return to the land of her mother. There, struck by a need to know the purpose of life, she goes to the resident wise man, who tells her that the cost of such knowledge (implying of course, that there is an answer) will be steep. She is resolute, and, following his instructions, goes to the shore to await the boatman who will take her on a guided tour of a

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much earlier time, in which both answer and the price for it will be made clear. Sort of.

We as readers get to travel with her through two utopias (two heavy-handed philosophical constructs replete with an evil that should try out for the role of a Bond villain because it's got a better speech than the last one, and James Bond movies need the "this is how the world is going to end at my hands!" speech. But I digress) and beyond, and as she does, we get to discover that there is God and there is the adversary (Asmodeus). But we're not as fortunate as she is because, at the end of a feat of great daring, she wakes up in the boat clutching The Book, with no memories of her voyage.

The Book is an artifact that was meant to be given to man so that man might find the true path to God.

As the underpinning of a novel, I can accept this. But....

There's a point at which the title character is watching a play and she finds it wanting because the protagonist shows no human emotion, no flaws or failings by which the audience could be brought to identify with his predicament, and therefore take more out of the experience...and that's the problem with the whole novel. Everything has a flat, very preachy quality to it; nothing surprises.

Even so, I gamely continued until Tathea's vision of another world in which there was a garden, a man, a woman, and the adversary; the tree of knowledge, the eating of the forbidden fruit, the coming of mortality and sin...and the birth of the son of God. At that point I kind of pulled the pillow over my head and hoped the book would improve with sleep. It didn't. I'm sure that people with a much better knowledge of things biblical than I can point out why the broad strokes and the specific strokes are different, but that's beside the point — *Tathea*'s supposed to be a *fantasy* novel.

This is *not* a book for me. It's not so much that I can't get past the message, as that there's nothing but message. The protagonist goes from bereaved Empress to effective Saint in one revelatory evening, and then begins to proselytize; she makes friends, she shows them The Book, and most of them see the truth in The Book and begin to follow its doctrine. There are those who don't, and she is sad that they will go to hell, but well, they were given the choice. She is pursued by the adversary and those who serve him, people die, she sees that her

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people are not ready for The Book yet, and that's sort of about it.

Except that I had to read 522 pages of it, and you only have to read a few paragraphs.

It was with great relief that I turned to Laurell K. Hamilton's new novel — the first of the Anita Blake books to make its way into hardcover. Let us take a brief moment to respect the sound of weeping from the less wealthy legion of Hamilton fans before we talk about the book.

Okay, that was long enough.

First, the book sports a very distinctive, very attractive cover that is different from any of the previous paperback covers; it's nicely designed, and looks very upscale. Second, it does seem to be a tad longer than the previous novels in that the type isn't all that big and the book isn't all that thin. And third, the series that started with *Guilty Pleasures* (I can't think of a more appropriate title for either that novel or the entire Anita Blake series) and moved at a brisk clip to *Blue Moon* continues in the same vein, if you'll pardon the pun. The contemporary here and now is still peopled with the undead, and the undead still have constitutional rights. But Anita knows that most of them are monsters, and that their real nature will out eventually, and she's there with artillery because she's licensed to kill. Or whatever it is you call putting the undead to rest. Hardcover or no, it's the same Anita Blake in new clothing, which for people who like to relax on the roller coaster, with the certainty of both safe thrills and a neat exit, is a very good thing.

Speaking of new clothing, Anita starts the book having totally trashed — with bloodstains — her work clothes (it's okay, the blood wasn't hers). She's tired, she's home, and she's not looking forward to a long conversation on the telephone. Which is sort of good, because when the phone does inevitably ring, it's her friend Edward the bounty hunter. Those of you who have followed the series so far know that she owes him a favor, and this is the book where he calls it in. There's a serial killer loose, and Edward is actually...frightened. Anita Blake, the legal Executioner, hasn't really run into that before, and besides, it's pay him back or shoot it out with him, so she packs up her full regalia and goes to his home town. Where she finds that the monster Edward, who has always had a soft spot for her...has developed other soft spots and possible questions about the direction his life has

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taken. Nice stretch of character for Edward, and it makes Anita once again question the decisions she's made with regard to Jean-Claude and Richard. Hamilton also introduces Olaf to Anita, another Executioner-type and a man who makes vampires seem pleasant. She's worried that he's a soul-mate. He's happy at the thought. We'll be seeing more of him, I can almost guarantee it.

So...there's not a lot of her two ex-beaus, but Edward's private life is certainly a draw, and his friends are...well, they make him look like a calm, sane, rational, normal person.

Is it worth the hardcover price? Yes. Go forth and buy in confidence.

And speaking of buying with confidence, the last book for this month is *Bios*, subtitled *A Novel of Planetary Exploration*, which is entirely accurate, but a tad dry unless you've already read the novel. The first thing you'll notice about the book is its length: it's short. At just over two hundred pages, it's dwarfed by the Perry, and doubled by the Hamilton — but it took me longer to read than either of the two previous books for two reasons. The first is that Wilson doesn't waste a word; the second, that his words are so well put together it's a joy just to pronounce them silently, syllable by syllable, rather than scanning their surface for simple information and moving on.

The prologue of the novel is a simple act of sabotage, but as with anything in a Wilson book, the simple is driven by the complex, and the act is at best half understood by the woman who, in a moment of privacy, on impulse, commits it. She is conducting a medical examination of a young woman with unusual augmentations, and she removes her patient's thymostat implant, an implant that dampens fear, anger, rage, joy, hormones — anything that makes a person profoundly human. There is no freedom on Earth; there are Families, and they essentially own the human universe. Take the young woman now missing a thymostat (Zoe's her name) as an example: she was designed (and presumably paid for) by a group of people with an interest in Isis, and her sole purpose in life is to walk the planet's surface. She has one friend: father-figure Avrion Theophilus, a person with an extremely vested interest in her performance.

But she has been sheltered from people for a long time; she can't

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stand the simplest of day-to-day touches — a handshake, and she has to work to force herself not to flinch; she's lived in a thymostat-imposed isolation while she trained hard to prepare for her life's completion: to explore the planet Isis. But life is not predictable. On the stations of Isis — unavoidable pitstops on the road to Isis itself — she meets people. She meets them without the chaperone of the thymostat to control and suppress her reactions.

Wilson, in his two hundred pages, has created a sense of complex political structure which most books several times as long can't dream of achieving — but the background worldbuilding is that: background. Wilson understands that in order to have believable characters, they must come from believable places; they must be a product of the experiences of their past, however much of that past is obscured, and to that end, the texture of the world out of which these people are born, and in which they're tangled, is absolutely necessary.

Zoe meets Tam Hayes. Tam Hayes has no part in the life that was planned for her at birth — should she survive — and she knows it...but, to quote another station hand, Elam Mather, "life touches life."

This is a book about defenses and the breaching of defenses; about life, about death, and about the complicated way in which the two are interwoven; about friendship and the things that make life valuable even when death is unavoidable. Better, it's written by a person whose every word shows that he's listened to and absorbed the way people speak when they're nervous, frightened, angry. He has no vested interest in turning those people into soap boxes or apologists; you can believe, reading Wilson's work, that every book is a struggle between structure and chaos — the structure a novel imposes and the chaos understanding of real people makes of that structure.

Every book that Robert Charles Wilson has written bears that stamp: He is never condescending. He is never less than clear-eyed and lucid. He never reduces humanity to equations and numbers. Although on the surface, the Hugo-nominated *Darwinia* and *Bios* have very little in common — the one being an alternate history (of sorts) in a past that echoes the familiar just enough to evoke and enforce the foreign, the other being possibly the most 'techie' novel Wilson has written — his acute observation of the human condition is evident from page one. Is he always successful? No,

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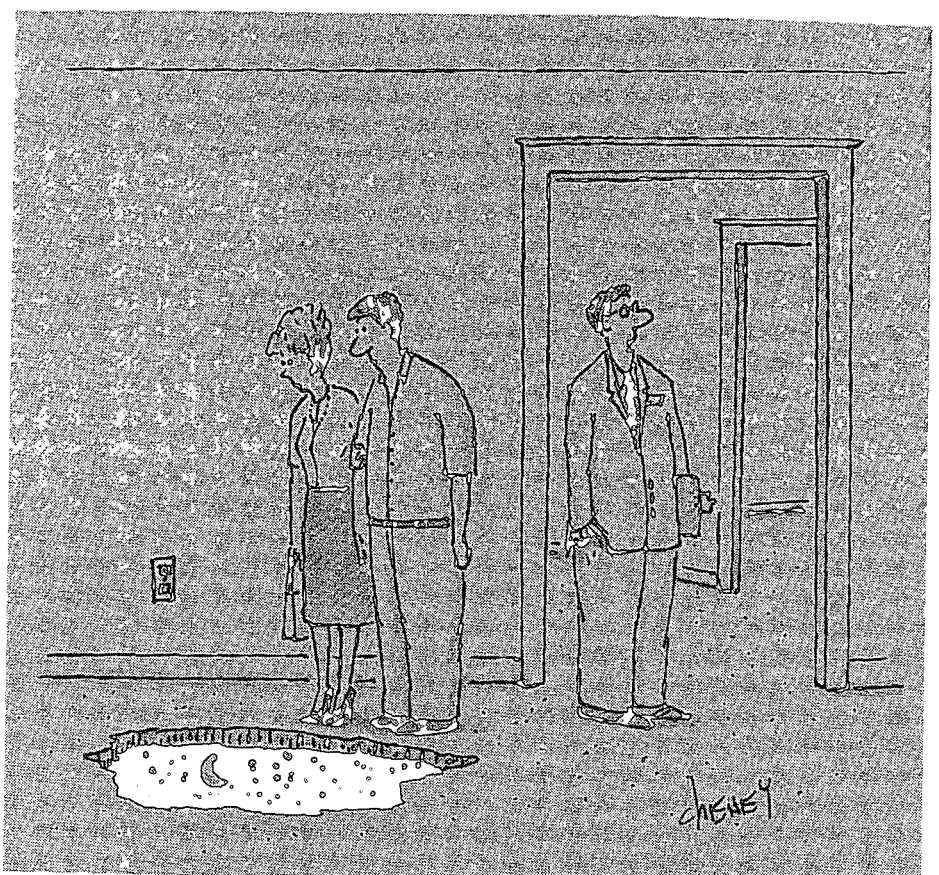
although I count *Bios* as one of his better works; if it lacks the finer character details of *Mysterium* (which is, I think, the novel of Wilson's that I best like), it also lacks the abrupt and structurally shaky ending. But he tries more when he stretches than most of us do, and if his books are flawed, they're flawed in the way that people you love are flawed; you don't love them any less; you may even love them more.

Don't judge *Bios* by its size or its cover; it's worth the time to hunt down and pick up.



"Yep, even with that small hole in the space-time continuum, the place is in excellent shape."

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The Louvre seems to be having an otherworldly year—this story is our second in four months to feature the museum (Henry Slesar's tale in the March issue was the first). Ms. Wood says she had a free passcard to the museum during the ten years she lived in Paris, and anyone who has spent time roaming the halls of a museum knows how good it is for one's imagination. But does the same hold true for aliens?

Three Merry Pranksters at the Louvre

By N. Lee Wood

WE CALLED OURSELVES THE Three Merry Pranksters that summer in Paris; Andrea and Collin and Kermit, terrors of the Louvre. I was young, shy and lonely, not feeling in the least like a Prince of the City and grateful as hell Andy would even deign to speak to the likes of me. She was going to the Collège des Beaux Artes on scholarships, and I was studying Esoterics at the Sorbonne. Don't ask me to explain that. I made up my own coursework and sold it in one brilliantly inspired and passionate session with the Academic Advisory Board. The drift of my argument I've long forgotten now.

It didn't matter. Like all of my kind, I was filthy rich, and the French authorities usually let those of us choosing to pay our taxes in France do pretty much whatever we damned well pleased.

They did, however, make us jump through the official hoops for appearance's sake. That's what I like about the French. They love bureaucracy, all the forms and ID photos and official stamps, but they're not pigheaded assholes about rules and regulations. "Alors, Monsieur does

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not have the absolutely mandatory obscure black-and-white, not color, slightly larger than passport-sized photograph? *Tiens*, the official fee for forms without the proper photograph is two hundred francs," *stamp-stamp*, "Voilà, here is your Carte de Merde, merci et au revoir, monsieur."

Andy and Collin, on the other hand, were the classical starving student and artist. Andy's mother was divorced, her father long vanished, and Andy had become a whiz at digging up every musty, dusty scholarship she could fit herself into in order to get through college. Not easy in the days before *we* arrived, especially in an educational system gutted by recession along with the rest of the American economy. Of course, it also helped that Andy was straight-A's all the way, in Japanese as well as art.

She was in Paris that summer on some kind of vague Japanese American Impressionist Appreciation Society scholarship, supposedly to write a master's thesis on the neo-classical Japanese Edo art influence on French Impressionism. It also had something to do with Monet, Gauguin and Van Gogh snorting cocaine and drinking absinthe together, but I never could quite figure that one out.

Collin had the same sort of problem in England, although things got only slightly better after Thatcherism fell, the socialist reformation wave of conscience that swept west out of Eastern Europe somehow finding the Channel an impassible barrier. He had not been as scholastically brilliant as Andy, but his parents both worked hard to try and keep him going. When he first arrived, he'd gotten off the Chunnel train in Montparnasse wearing almost nostalgically outdated heavy-punk leather gear, purposely torn and frayed jeans artistically smeared with motor grease, his pink and orange mohawk a little limp as his own mousy brown hair started growing back in over his shaved and skull-n-crossbones tattooed scalp.

Which, after you knew him awhile, was really funny; Collin was the most politically conservative person I'd ever met. Had his parents been more affluent, he probably would never have "rebelled," dropped out and come to Paris to be a starving artist at all. He'd be shuffling around London right now in his gray three-piece striped woolens, battered briefcase under one arm, a harried minor partner in some genteelly respectable solicitors' firm.

Instead, he'd taken the RER and got off at the St. Germain-St. Michel Metro, the first street name he recognized. Lugging a shabby brown

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suitcase with the faded "No Poll Tax" sticker peeling over a crudely lettered FUK U on its side, he stumbled up out of the Metro station blinking in the sudden bright light. Across the street, in the square dominated by the St. Michel Fountain, lolled dozens more young people dressed in some variant of his own fashion sense, or rich enough to afford whatever fad in sleaze was currently chic. Clumped in groups and loose cliques, they lounged in the sunlight, sat on the edge of the fountain in the square. A couple of mangy looking, half-grown German shepherd dogs, bright red handkerchiefs tied around their shaggy necks, chased frisbees thrown into the water.

That's where I was, leaning up against one of the pedestals topped by a bronze dragon spitting a weak dribble of water into the fountain. I was watching Andy, her face painted white with black stripes over her eyes in classic mime style, standing on the top of an anti-car bollard doing some kind of Tai Chi or Kung-fu or phony Yogi-Schmogi exercises in shiny orange Spandex leotards while the Ruddy Rat's Asses blasted out Clunk Rock on her antique boombox. She called it "performance art," and I called it "con art," which she snorted at but didn't deny. She enjoyed it.

I had never seen a naked woman, but her leotards did not leave much for the imagination. The skintight cloth emphasized every curve in her body including the rather massive ones on her ribcage threatening to pop out at any moment from the top of her low neckline arranged specifically for that purpose. Once in a while, somebody would stop, stare at her perfect, if thin, young body, and drop a few francs into the battered hat next to the boombox. I liked watching them watching her, because then they didn't notice me quite so much.

I have never gotten used to people staring at me, and was particularly sensitive to it at that age. Although I wore the baggiest clothing I could find to hide behind, I couldn't disguise what I was. It was bad enough just to stand out in a crowd, but the strange mixture of curiosity, envy, and hate in their faces hurt.

"It's not fair, I'm just a kid," I'd pouted over a kir royale to Andy after one of her panhandling "performance art" shows. Actually, I was older than Andy or Collin, but it's hard for people to read my face. Usually, people assume I'm younger than I am because I'm fairly small. It's sometimes annoying, but occasionally it's useful. "It's not like I'm acting

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like a prick about anything. I don't have my bank access number tattooed on my forehead."

She'd laughed. "Yes, you do." She grinned, wild curling hair wet with sweat at the dark tips. "You got filthy, rotten, stinking, *disgustingly* rich written all over your goddamned *body*, Kermit. Everyone *loves* to hate the obscenely rich."

It wasn't just the money, as we both knew, and we both knew well enough to steer clear of that particular issue. I stared down at the raspberry colored champagne bubbling along the sides of my glass. "How come you don't hate me then?"

She leaned over the table and held up her fist, index finger extended. "Un," she said dramatically, "Je suis une *artiste*; money is a petty concern beneath my lofty attention. I'm far too proud to sully my dignity with such trash. Et deux," she held up another finger, "you always pay for the drinks." She grinned wickedly. "Et puis trois," she finished, "what makes you so sure I don't?"

That was just the kind of insecurity she knew kept me trotting after her, begging her friendship like a stray dog. She loved it. I was more than happy to oblige her.

So, when Collin trudged over next to where I leaned against the fountain and dropped his suitcase onto the cement, my stomach tightened reflexively. I looked up at him in what I hoped was my best *fuck-off* expression.

His was better than mine. He shot a narrow look at Andy, then back at me. "You with her, or you just slummin' it?" He shoved his hands in his pockets, glaring at me belligerently.

I caught Andy glancing at me, a little worried. "Yeah, we're together. What's it to you?"

He grunted and sat down on the edge of his suitcase. It creaked precariously. "Name's Collin. I just spent the last twenty-four fookin' hours gettin' 'ere, I'm broke, I'm knackered and I'm 'ungry, and I hain't even found a place to crash yet."

Great. Another goddamned beggar. Just what I needed. I reached into the pocket of my jacket for some spare cash. "How much do you want?" I asked him tiredly, pulling out a fistful of 200 franc notes.

"Fook you, space cadet," he said, his eyes flickering to the money and

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back to me. He got up and opened his suitcase, a dozen unframed canvases inside. He propped the first couple against the stone edge of the fountain. "I hain't looking for no charity handout, asshole. I wanna sell you one of my paintings."

Surprised, I glanced at the paintings, and noticed they were good. I mean, *really* good. Andy stopped standing on her head with her legs in a lotus position, flipped off the music and pocketed her spare change out of the hat before she wandered up to stand behind the boy with the ridiculous mohawk.

"Why me?" I asked.

The kid laughed harshly, and looked around the square with mock innocent eyes. "You think any of these fine upstanding citizens hanging out 'ere got scads of money dripping out their ears and just aching to buy some bloody amateur's scribblin's? I see you, I *know* you got a roll, and you with mimegirl makes me think maybe you like art." He emphasized the last word with a touch of irony. Andy grinned, lopsided.

"You got a lot of nerve," she said.

He regarded her coolly. "You panhandle your way, Yank, I'll do it mine, okay?"

I ended up buying two paintings and lunch for the three of us at the corner brasserie.

"That y'real name, 'Kermit'?" Collin demanded, mouth full of steak tartare. "Don't sound very French t'me."

"Nah. My real name's too hard for most people to pronounce. Kermit's just what Andy calls me," I said. I like steak tartare, but Collin seemed to be making a kind of personal statement with wolfing down the raw meat. I ordered oysters on the half shell instead, torturing their little writhing bodies with lemon juice and vinegar before slurping them down with what I hoped was a convincingly merciless sneer curling on my lips.

"Like Kermit the Frog, y'know?" Andy said. "French, frog, *Sesame Street*. It seemed to fit."

Collin looked confused. It didn't help clear it up when I sang the first few lines in a perfect quavering imitation, "It's not easy being greeeeeeeeen..."

Andy laughed at his expression. "You never see *Sesame Street*?" she teased, "What a sad, deprived childhood you've had!"

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"Don't get that kinda rerun American roobish anymore on British telly. We got our own roobish, thank you very much."

Andy grinned, Collin grinned back and became part of our group.

I bought several more of Collin's paintings that summer, all pieces I admired, but partly because he seriously needed the cash and wouldn't bring himself to ask me. I think he resented knowing I knew. And, maybe, looking back now, I think he might have resented giving up those paintings, even if he was pleased I bought them, because I never bought anything I didn't think was very, very good.

I helped Andy out in paying her rent in the incredibly tiny maid's room tucked up in the rooftop of a six-story walk-up, her tuition, her books, her art supplies. Not a lot, but art scholarships only went so far. Collin accepted nothing from me, overt or covert. Except for food. And wine. The three of us ate out everyday and I picked up the tab for all of us. I mean, what the hell? What are friends for anyway, right? But Collin didn't have much to begin with and didn't manage what he had very well. If my offering made him sullen, Andy's offer to help him out from her scholarship money made him furious. It was a sore spot he never quite adjusted to.

Andy did help Collin get through all the French officialdom that stays up late at night dreaming up ways of making it insanely frustrating if you're both an ignorant foreigner and an ignorant foreigner who can't speak French. My French, actually, was fluent, but I didn't volunteer. Andy could handle French bureaucracy and neither of them wanted me to be doing any favors for them. Pride, you know? What a fucking strange pain in the ass that is.

But what we did do, and it surprised me, was start sneaking Collin into the Louvre. Most people who go to the Louvre are tourists, and like most tourists, they see a big line, figure that's the only way in, and queue up like obedient little soldiers. But there's at least two other ways I know of to get into the Louvre where there's never a line and you don't need any special passes. We let Collin in on the secret after making him swear a solemn oath not to spread it around. Tell one tourist, and pretty soon, instead of one incredibly long line and two secret ways in, there's three incredibly long lines.

Of course, I was a Bienfaiteur of the museum, which meant I'd made

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a substantial contribution yearly to the Louvre, and had a pass card that got me just about anywhere I wanted to go. Andy had a Sociétaire card, a slight cut above the basic Adherent card, which gave her more or less the same freebies that I did, except for all the hoity-toity ministry invitations to private openings and such. It didn't cost all that much, and for an art student on a limited budget, it paid for itself in a very short time. But Collin never had enough cash in one lump sum for a card, and paid the regular entrée fee each time. Which meant, of course, we couldn't use the private entrance for card holders only.

We'd decided to go see the Max Frankelberg exhibition in the new Richelieu wing, and were walking through the courtyard past the giant glass pyramid when Collin started cursing softly. Andy and I stopped.

"You go on without me," Collin said. "I forgot my bloody wallet." He glared at me, redfaced.

I knew he hadn't forgotten; it was a convenient excuse to save face. I also knew better than to offer to lend him the few miserable francs he needed to get in. Andy glanced at me, shifting her feet. "You know what, Collin?" she said, cheerfully, "Before I got my card, Kermit used to sneak me in. Let's go over to the Amis de Louvre entrance, and we'll get you in free."

It was a lie, but okay, so what?

"It won't work," he protested all the way, "Never."

"Sure, it will!" Andy kept us going. "Me and Kermit will just hold up our cards, and the guard'll be so busy checking cards and looking at *him*, you just look like you belong there, and we'll all breeze right on by together!"

"Shoulda sliced the mohawk," he muttered.

I didn't think it would work, but Andy was right. The guard barely glanced at the cards, too busy staring at me curiously. As Collin followed us in, the guard's eyes narrowed suspiciously, but he did nothing.

Once inside, Andy doubled over giggling, clutching Collin's arm. "It *worked*, it *worked*, I can't *believe* it!"

"I thought you did this before!" Collin protested.

I shrugged while Andy wheezed out a new fit of giggles. For some reason, the silliness infected us all that day, and that began the Three Merry Pranksters.

The Louvre is, for the most part, an intelligently laid out museum,

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well furnished with upholstered backless couches to rest and look at the artwork when your feet get tired. The three of us sat, solemnly regarding Delacroix's gigantic "Death of Sardanapale." An Eastern Oriental monarch lounges about after drinking poison, a mysterious half-smile on his face, while his concubines and servants are being massacred, and his palace in the background burnt to the ground. He doesn't appear to give a damn. Probably cooked to the gills on opium.

"You see there, where Delacroix uses the effect of yellow and red?" Collin was saying. "That's supposed to give you the sensation of fire and smoke. You feel it?"

"Uh-huh," Andy said after a pause, unconvinced. There was another long silence. "What I want to know," she said finally, "is why is there a horse in the guy's bedroom?"

Collin looked at her puzzled. "What?"

She pointed. "Look, there's a *horse* in old Sardanapale's bedroom. What's a goddamned horse doing in the bedroom?"

Collin blinked at it. "Because Delacroix liked painting horses, I guess," he said finally. And grinned. "What *I* want to know is who tied the girl to the bedpost?"

It was my turn to blink. Yes, I hadn't noticed it, and there she was, half-hidden in the shadows. Dangling by her bound wrists, one terrified courtesan twisted half naked, helplessly watching her fellow ladies being stabbed while awaiting her turn to die. Had the wicked old sultan tied her up for his depraved kicks before the slaughter? Had the killers trussed her up to make her wait her turn? Was Delacroix a perverted painter? A talented dirty old man?

We speculated, and giggled until the skinny man in the blue suit identifying him as a museum watchdog glared at us. We strolled off, in search of more funny art.

The huge Gobelin tapestry sent us into peals of laughter, a mongrel dog taking a quite graphic dump in the foreground while some king in frilly lace shirts and pantyhose, Charles or Henri, sat on his horse and pretended not to notice.

We found the Greek statuary hilarious. The three of us were giggling euphorically over a statue of a maniacally grinning peasant disemboweling some sort of goat or small cow. It hung upside down, flayed skin hiding

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its head, while the man's hand plunged elbow deep into the animal's interior, loops of intestines draping down. It inspired our first Prank, in fact.

Behind us, a guide holding up a stick with various colored streamers attached to the top, marched through the room followed by two or three dozen Japanese tourists. She droned on in Japanese with the kind of schoolmarm voice that hasn't been used inside a classroom in a century, while dark-haired heads bobbed and murmured ahh's and ooh's in perfect unison. Andy turned to listen.

"What's she saying?" I asked. My Japanese was not rusty; at that time it was nonexistent.

"She's telling them...that the figure reclining...is actually very old and fragile...it was discovered at the beginning of the seventeenth century...it belonged to another piece...but...shit, I missed that part...some guy named Berthelot carved her a new foot...it's sticking up at the wrong angle...his cousin carved the marble mattress to support it...see the difference in the two kinds of stone...please don't touch the statue..." Andy made out, forehead wrinkling.

"Shit," Collin breathed, amazed. "You understand that fookin' jabberin'?"

Andy smiled grimly. "Japanese, Chinese, and German are required subjects in American schools these days, along with global business economics. I took four years of Japanese, but it's not as good as it should be. Especially the writing."

That, for some reason, took a little of the levity we'd been feeling out of us. I knew Andy had strong if ambiguous feelings about her country and its waning prestige to the rest of the world, which Collin shared in a different way.

But I'm a true foreigner. I've never felt any patriotic loyalty to a specific and arbitrary plot of ground. Invisible borders don't make sense. Growing up belonging to nowhere in particular is like belonging everywhere. But emotional divisions make me uncomfortable, even when I personally have no stake in any of it.

We watched as the tour group trotted out into the next wing, a few quick glances up at the towering marble columns of colossal women before vanishing in pursuit of celebrity masterpieces. Andy strolled over to the reclining statue, Collin and me in lagging tow. A slender Greek

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woman with an enigmatic smile and a boy's penis reclined uncomfortably on a slab of marble carved into a Victorian padded mattress, lumpy and bound with tasseled cords.

"That really is hideous," she said, "Looks like one of those blow-up air mattresses I used to camp out on."

"Yeah." Collin snickered. "All it needs is one of those air valves stuck on it."

We looked at each other, and *The Idea* was born. Being the least imaginative of the three, I opted for buying some plastic blow-up child's toy and taking the mouthpiece off of it. Andy and Collin promptly vetoed that, and we all headed down to the Rouge et Plie art store on Blvd. Beaumarchais. We argued about the merits of actually carving one out of marble to taking an impression and casting several. Collin, ever the purist opted for marble, while Andy finally prevailed with the voice of reason; money and time being a strong consideration.

Andy had one of those inflatable air pillows a friend had given her for plane trips. It was fairly simple to take an impression of the valve, and cast a dozen replicas (to get the exact color match) in Marblex. A bit of double sided carpet tape, and we were ready.

Then we went back to the Louvre and argued about the best place to put the fake valve. Put it at the foot of the mattress, in plain view, Andy said. Nobody ever sees what's under their noses. Naw, guards'll spot it straight off, Collin argued, let's stick it way down under the side, just pokin' out like. No way, Andy was getting mad, people'll be so busy ogling a woman with a dick they won't even notice the valve, that's no fun....

I, I'm proud to say, made the final choice and proved myself a true member of the Merry Pranksters: we stuck the fake on the back, barely under the fair maiden's pillow, both concealed and yet in plain view at the same time.

Then we sat back and watched.

It was almost disappointing. Anti-climatic, in a way. We lounged around, Collin sketching some piece of antiquated kitsch to give us an excuse for hanging around. Nobody noticed a goddamned thing! Hours went by. Tour groups plodded obediently through the halls, nodding and murmuring in properly subdued museum quality tones. Museum guides rattled off their memorized texts in polyphonic languages, while looking

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just above, or slightly to the side, but never directly *at* whatever it was they were presently lecturing about.

"Well, this was all a bit of a come-down, now wunnit?" Collin said disgustedly, glaring up over his sketchpad at the clot of bermuda-shorted senior citizens standing around our altered statuary.

The Three Merry Pranksters might have retired right then if not for one of those elderly tourists. Potbelly swelling behind a Hawaiian print shirt, camera perched around a wrinkled neck, bony knees under equally lurid shorts, he strolled around to the back of the statue where the pack was thinner. He blinked. Bent down a little closer. And blinked again. Then he looked up at the guide rattling on in Portuguese with a puzzled expression. And blinked.

Andy had to turn away, her fit of giggles choking into repressed coughs. The lines of Collin's face twitched, a grin threatening to pop out at any moment.

As the tour group bustled away behind the guide waving her decorated stick over her head, the man lingered behind. Slowly, he raised his camera, focused on a narrow spot near the head of the reclining statue and snapped a bewildered photograph before hobbling off to join his venerable compatriots.

We celebrated by admiring one of Le Brun's canvasses, a monstrous tableau of the Battle of Arbelles. Alexander the Great and Darius the Merciless are duking it out while friends and steeds are valiantly meeting gloriously dramatic deaths. Truly hideous.

Except for the "good bits," Collin the Art Historian informed us, all of it was painted by a battalion of apprentices slaving away in the artist's atelier. Andy, of course, speculated loudly that whoever was chief on the shitlist got stuck painting the fist-sized, flame red assholes of the dying warhorses. We got some dirty looks.

Three weeks later, our modest alteration had vanished. We were surprised it lasted that long, but by that time, we were already busy thinking up new ways to appreciate art.

I have to point out, we never damaged the artwork. We never touched a painting, for example, because the work was far too fragile and delicate. However, we didn't have any reticence about creatively altering a few of the explanatory labels alongside them.

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We concentrated our endeavors on statuary, for the most part. Small modifications were pasted on with easily removable glues. We did dozens of jokes, small, discreet. The button nipples of Roman nymphs pressing against their stone togas sprouted exquisitely detailed marble buttonholes. The empty hands of red granite Egyptian pharaohs now held red granite replicas of Metro tickets. A matching pair of wonderfully executed small "bronze" busts of Charles de Gaulle and François Mitterand wearing laurel leaves appeared in a corner of a Napoleonic exhibition, with a proper label identifying them clearly as fakes. In perfectly correct Babylonian. I wrote it.

That was our least successful caper, and for all purposes, our last. Charlie and Frank disappeared after a mere two days, and the museum started watching for us. We barely got away with stuffing a refashioned test tube into the empty socket in the groin of a Mesopotamian athlete which in a few weeks would sprout dainty, green marijuana leaves out the end from seeds buried in the agar. As was our usual routine, Collin sketched, Andy did the dirty deed while I strolled around to keep the guard's attention on me, ordinarily easy enough to do. But our faces were becoming too well known, and the guards' normally enigmatic expressions were subtly suspicious, eyes a shade narrowed. The test tube never even had the chance to sprout before it was removed, and we decided to quit while we were ahead.

Also, it was near the end of summer, time to return to classes, get serious again. Time to give up adolescent pranks and think about the future. It was the best summer of my life, and even when Andy and Collin went their separate ways, the three of us drifting apart, we kept in touch. Sort of.

Andy went back to America, married a New York corporate lawyer and opened her own successful art gallery in Soho. I had nothing to do with the financing, nor did I personally invest in the gallery, but I didn't think it wrong to quietly mention it to my compatriots who collected. Word got around, and the gallery flourished. Its success could have had as much to do with her husband's connections and Andy's considerable ability and perseverance as my casual namedropping.

One of her exhibition shows, of course, was of Collin's work. He never returned to Britain, settling instead on a quasi-cattle ranch in Argentina

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where the tax benefits for artists outmatched Ireland's only by the gorgeous warm weather. Every so often, I'd see his work in an art magazine, a fuzzy photograph of him and his newest wife on the back page of a newspaper.

I saw Collin at his last major exhibition in Amsterdam. I had just completed my sixteenth language session, including Japanese (and the rapidly vanishing Ainu dialect). Languages fascinated me, and I collected them like some people collect butterflies, or stamps...or paintings. I was now fluent in Tagalog, and close to completing an extensive bilingual Tagalog-Dutch dictionary for an Esoterica publishing house in Den Hague. It was convenient for me to zip up by the mag train to Amsterdam for the show.

I hadn't bought one of Collin's works in a long time. I would never have said so to him, but I liked his art when it was younger, rougher, fire behind a few of the uncertain lines. As he got older and more famous, it had solidified, each paint stroke infallible, unwaveringly sure of itself. He gradually hardened into the mold of a Serious Artist, the humor behind his work slowly leached away.

I hadn't realized how much time had gone by since the summer of the young Merry Pranksters. I don't have much of a sense of time, I'm afraid, never have. I don't know if Andy or Collin could see how shocked I was.

Andy's dark, curly hair had gone completely white, tinted with a slightly blonde rinse to keep it from looking too stark. Her face had seen its final face-lift, and the smooth taut skin over the sharp cheekbones made her look slightly cadaverous. She was still slender, thin muscles in her arms hard and cabled from daily exercise workouts, ribcage showing ridges through the soft folds of her blouse. Her once astonishing breasts looked somehow different, armored support over their swell. When she shook my hand, the old strength was still there underneath the mottled skin.

Collin hadn't aged quite as well. He seemed to have given up the fight somewhere around fifty, and let himself grow fat. Bald now, his tattoo removed, what remained of his thin hair along the back of his skull was cropped into short, white stubble. He did, however, have a subtle pink streak in his Hemingway beard.

He wobbled slightly as he strolled through the crowded gallery,

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double scotch in one hand, a *Royal Dutchman* brand hash cigarette in the other. His wife (number seven? or was it eleven? I hadn't kept count) hovered by his side as if to catch him if he toppled over, worry and mild exasperation pinching her young face.

"Eh, well, 'ere now! It's fookin' Kermit!" he boomed, grabbing me by both shoulders and shaking me like a rag doll. His breath washed over my face, the alcohol fumes making my eyes water. "Come to check over a couple more m'scribblin's?" He didn't wait for any answer, which was just as well since I didn't have one ready.

People turned, as if permission had suddenly been given that it was okay to stare at the drunken famous artist and his weird friend.

"Kermit 'ere bought my first work, back when we were kids hangin' out in gay Paree. Knew a real artist right from th' beginnin'!" He slapped me a bit harder than friendly on the back. "A born connoisseur, right?" The grin was hard, white false teeth screwed into his jawbone. Shark's teeth, mean and stark and emotionless.

His wife glanced at me, apologetic, a frazzled plea for understanding in her eyes. I muttered something, I don't remember what. Andy rescued me, extricating me skillfully from his grasp, steered me genteelly toward the drinks, while Collin's wife shepherded him away in another direction. The crowd's interest ceased instantly.

The white uniformed man behind the bar poured me a drink of something without even a raised eyebrow, a real pro. Or maybe it was simply that by then my novelty had worn off. Andy and I exchanged the usual vacuous pleasantries. The words died away and we simply stood, holding drinks and looking at each other.

"Times change," Andy said, smiling thinly. "So do people."

"I'm sorry," I said, staring down into the red circle of wine in my glass. "I didn't mean it to be that obvious."

"Oh, not you. You haven't changed. Not one bit." She wasn't flattering me. I was surprised by the resentment in her voice. I was trying to find a tactful way of answering when, unfortunately, Collin shook off his watchdog wife and weaved over just in time to hear Andy's last remark.

"'Course not, darlin'," he said loudly. I wondered if he was losing his hearing, and shouted the way deaf people sometimes do. I preferred that explanation to what I suspected: Collin enjoyed being the center of the

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scene, and like any good actor had learned to project his voice to make sure everyone could hear every word.

"Kermit's still a kid, y'know! Hasn't even got started on 'is life while th' rest of us'r dropping off like flies!" He hit me on the back again, nearly ejecting the drink out of my hand. "You don't have kids of your own yet, do you, Kermit?" He knew I didn't, didn't bother waiting for an answer. "Me, I'm burning out the ladies trying to propagate me precious artistic genes!" He grabbed his crotch and roared with laughter. His wife looked stricken.

"Don't..." Andy whispered under Collin's laugh. I almost didn't hear her, and I wasn't sure who she was addressing.

Collin's laugh cut off abruptly. He glared at Andy. "Don't gi' me that look," he said, his false good nature gone. His face was flushed with anger and alcohol, eyes turned piglike small, red from the hash. "We're all friends 'ere, aren't we? Say what's on'r minds, eh?" He gestured grandly, including everyone in the room and somehow still leaving me out of the motion.

I was shaking, wishing desperately I could find a tactful way of leaving. "One for all and all for one," I mumbled into my glass. "The Three Merry Pranksters, back to back."

Collin wasn't as deaf as I thought. He rounded on me in real hostility. "*You*." He said. "What the fookin' hell d'you know about it? You don't know a goddamned thing about friendship. You don't know *shit* about serious art, laughin' at it, laughin' at *us* while you drive us off the face of the planet, you miserable arrogant asshole!"

Several people grabbed him by his stout arms, trying to pull him away as he leaned against them, yelling at me. "Who gave you the right, eh, Kermit? Who d'you think y'are, judging human beings, you fookin'..." He sputtered incoherently to a stop, staring at me, tears suddenly in his eyes. The anger had vanished and the surprising pain in its place burnt me numb. Then he whirled around, turning his back to me and nearly knocking over his entourage.

I'm embarrassed to say I fled the gallery rather ignominiously, and found myself standing in the train station, glass of wine still clutched in my hand. I cried all the way back to my hotel. I did.

Collin drank himself to death a few years later. I didn't go to the

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funeral, even though I was sent an invitation. I didn't even bother to send flowers, not because his death didn't sadden me, but because I thought it better not to remind anyone of me.

By that time, I had returned to Paris and had bought a penthouse floor on the Quai St. Michel, just around the corner from the fountain, overlooking Notre Dame and the Seine. I still adored Paris, one of the few cities in the world that blends its ultramodern ambitious heart seamlessly with its ageless soul. Notre Dame still shimmered golden in the sunlight, and the booksellers still sold ancient books and cheap postcards to tourists from their green vendor's boxes along the banks of the river. Young artists from the École des Beaux Artes still competed with the experienced craftsmen along the quais and in the squares. The Bateaux Mouches boats that rippled the water carrying their camera-adorned tourist cargo were identical to the boats that had plied past the twin islands at the core of Paris for a hundred years.

Small cars still clogged narrow streets, horns bleating as they fought for illegal parking spaces. They floated inches above the tiny piles of doggie doo still faithfully collected by the vacuum cleaning motorfloaters, the Merde Max patrol in their traditional green jumpsuits. The *flics* policing the rues and boulevards, proud in their sharp blue uniforms and their high-tech gear, still saluted civilians who stopped them to ask directions. Underneath the noisy city streets, metro trains whisked from station to station on silent mag tracks, the deep subsonic rumble from my early childhood long vanished.

There were more of *us* around by then, too, and I began to get the usual urges my kind get, not so unlike the rest of the world. I felt the need to settle down, buy a place to "entertain." I started associating more with my own people, looking for possible nightly company. I was also going through that period of my life where old friends really *were* old, and it was painful losing them.

Andy called me, the picture muted from the public phone, a few weeks after Collin's funeral. She was a couple of blocks away, could she come up for a few minutes?

When I opened the door, she carried a carton wrapped box, obviously crating a painting. She had aged even more, not bothering any longer to tint the white hair blonde. She was breathing hard from lugging the

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painting the brief few feet from the elevator to my door. "Collin wanted you to have this," she said as a greeting. An old woman's voice, a stranger's voice.

I unwrapped it, gazing at it for long minutes without speaking. It was not a great painting, not technically one of his brilliant masterworks, as I suppose I expected. It was a portrait of the three of us done some years before his style had settled into Collin's recognizable tour de force. Three young, shiny faces laughed in Parisian sunshine, mischievous, in love with life, all the world ahead of them.

"I like it." What was there to say?

The old woman beside it smiled bitterly.

I made some coffee, and we sat on the balcony, watching the swirl of people below while we sipped.

"It doesn't even seem like there are fewer people in Paris now, compared to when I lived here," Andy said. And looked at me with red-rimmed eyes deep in their sockets.

"Paris is still a place to see, it's as crowded as it ever was," I said, not wanting to get into it. "Travel is cheap. A lot more people have the time and money and want to spend it seeing the world." I emphasized the word "people," unwilling to allow the verbal division between us.

She was quiet for a long time. "Collin was right, you know. It isn't fair," she said, voice old and querulous. "What will happen to all this once we're gone?" She waved a bony hand vaguely toward Notre Dame, toward the city, toward the world.

"We will protect it, cherish it, preserve it," I said.

"Like you were able to protect and cherish human beings?" she responded bitterly. "Why can't you preserve us, while you're at it? This is *our* world, not yours. We belong here. You don't."

I didn't give her the usual arguments. I'd been a naive child when my people came. Most now were born here. This *was* our home. We were creatures of the universe, the same as everyone else. We had as much right to be here as they did, the definitions between First World natives and Third World immigrants and Other World invaders completely incomprehensible to us and, with a little help and gentle persuasion, completely out-of-date.

It wasn't *our* fault, either. When my kind started out, they didn't

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know this world would already have a civilization, how could they have? It had been a hundred thousand years, and once here, we couldn't simply say, "Gee, folks, we made a mistake, sorry about that," turn around and spend another hundred thousand years to go back. Our "home" had vanished in a starburst, a nova that now was too faint to even be seen in the night sky.

"We've done what we can. We haven't hurt you," I said, weakly. The conditions limiting her own people had been here before we came. No one could blame us for that.

"You're not doing anything to help us, either," she said. "You mimic us, you admire us, you try to be just like us, but you're outbreeding us a thousand to one while we're mysteriously dying off."

This didn't seem like Andy, not my friend, my *artiste* companion.

"It's not like we're shoving people into gas ovens, or sterilizing anyone, Andy. We're not trying to kill your people off." We both knew what I meant, the constantly mutating diseases we were immune to, the ever increasing rates of human infertility.

"No, of course not," she retorted. Her hands had balled into fists. "You breezed in with all your magic technology and took over the entire planet. Oh, yes, we were lucky to have you, I'm sure. Suddenly everybody's a Have, no more Have-Nots. Free education, free medicine for everybody, all the improvements evened out so everyone could prosper from a better standard of living without anyone ever quite noticing there were fewer and fewer of us around to enjoy it. It's just all a bit too coincidental, don't you think?"

"It's not like that, Andy...."

Her chin quivered suddenly, her voice thick. "Really? Are you honestly going to suggest it's just that a more educated, prosperous society tends to have fewer children? How fascinating that as our population shrinks, yours is busy filling up the vacuum. You've interfered with everything else human, why not *that*?" It was a cry of despair. I knew she had never had children.

My own anger was part righteousness and part shame. I had thought I knew her better. "Okay, Andy, maybe we *should* have left things as we found them. Women in India dying in their twenties worn out after having a dozen babies. Children starving in Ethiopia and Somalia and Bangladesh

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and *Texas*, for godsake. Fourteen-year-old Catholic children in Brazilian ghettos forced to have unwanted children while their rich neighbors sneak over the border for abortions? So let's go back to systematically drowning Chinese baby girls, why don't we?" The heat in my gut was making me feel sick as I grew angrier, unable to stop myself.

"Tell me it's unethical that the Kurds aren't being gassed anymore, or that Iraqi babies aren't dying from drinking shit-infested water. Would you prefer that the Croats and Serbs and the Israelis and Arabs and the Russians and the Ukrainians and every other tiny little piece of dirt with more than three people on it kept on hating and killing each other? Is that what you want to preserve, the right to breed gun fodder?"

I was trembling. She didn't answer for a while, sipping at coffee that must have been tepid by then. "Tell me something, Kermit. How many children do you have?" she asked coldly.

I sighed and shrugged, deflated. "I don't know. A couple hundred, I'd guess."

I didn't know any of them. Strangers all, parentless children born able to take care of themselves within hours, huge curious eyes eager to take in their new world. A massive collective bank account, limitless funds to draw on all their lives. Each of them living four to five times longer than Andy or Collin could have ever hoped to. And every decade, another explosion of children, all of them producing thousands more children until we'd filled in the system and our natural biology slowed down to a reasonable pace. Something would have to give. It wouldn't be us.

"And when there are more of you than us, what will you do then? Put us in zoos? Pack up what's left and send us out to take someone else's planet away from them?"

I didn't bother to tell her we'd both be long dead by that time. It wouldn't have been any comfort to her at all.

We changed the subject, talked about innocuous things, what we'd been doing, where we'd been, anemic gossip about people we knew. The sky darkened to red, and Andy started to fidget, anxious to leave. I escorted her to the door.

"If you're in Paris long, I'd like to see you again," I said, my anger forgotten. I really did mean it.

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Andy stared at me, old eyes unblinking. "I don't think so," she said, a hard edge in the wavering voice.

It took me by surprise, painfully. "It was just a small disagreement, Andy. We're still friends," I said quietly. "I thought we loved each other...."

She smiled and shook her head. "How little you understood any of us, Kermit. I thought you were amusing, and I certainly didn't mind the financial help now and then. I had other concerns. I used you, in a way, which I apologize for now, but I'd do it again in a minute."

I was standing stupidly, just listening, not comprehending at all what she was saying.

"I grew up always having something being taken away from me, resenting having to depend on rich people to get where I thought I deserved to be. First the Japanese and the Europeans, then you. It didn't matter. I was smart, but *dirty* smart, not a genius like Collin. I had rich friends, I married well. I wanted to get on top and stay there without ever having to depend on anyone else again. Not you. Not the Japanese. Not even my husband, rest his poor, overworked soul.

"I'm a bitch, Kermit. I told you I was but you never believed it. It was Collin who loved you. Collin who adored you, and you couldn't see that either. He poured it all into his paintings, thinking you were the only one he could really trust to see his talent for what it was, his worth as an artist," she laughed harshly, "as a human being. He really believed in all that wise alien superiority bullshit. He so badly wanted your approval and it hurt him when all you admired was the art and you still couldn't see *him*."

She turned, hesitated, and looked back over her shoulder. "He couldn't see you the way I do. You're no better nor wiser than we are, and in some way you're much smaller. You take what you can't make. Our art, our future, our planet. We can joke with art, be amused by it, but it's our heart and soul and we take it all very seriously. It's *human*, Kermit, something you imitate well, but don't understand. When you run us into oblivion or out of town, you'll have lost the most important element, and all you will have left is the shell."

She left, closing the door gently, and I never saw her again.

I spend a lot of time in the Louvre these days. I see more and more of

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my kind there, and less of Andy's. Some of them might even be my own children, I wouldn't know. I'd like to think so, somehow.

The Etruscan exhibit is my favorite. I can stand for hours and look at the mysterious smiles on the faces of loving couples carved in stone sarcophagi. I love the little figurines all lined up in the glass cases; the little boy blowing the fire under the huge pot. A man with a comical hat playing a flute. An obese man dancing with his companions, arms entwined around their shoulders. The laughing statuettes of couples in playful sexual coupling. A girl playing a harp. The child holding the furious goose in his too small arms. It's the joy and the humor and the love of life I see in these small poignant shapes.

I wonder about the people who left them. Long vanished, extinguished by the conquering Romans, their culture, religion, even their everyday language lost forever. Would they have drawn grease pencil Charlie Chaplin mustaches over the beatific smiles on the faces of their ancestor's tombs?

I think she's wrong, Andy was. I don't know if I understand art. Do you need to be a dancer to love the dance? My kind aren't good at creating it, but I'd like to believe it's possible to appreciate it without being an artist myself. I'd like to think that the spirit and soul of these vanished people are still here, in the art, in the eyes of the people who see it and love them for it.

People like me.

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After spending several years in Thailand, Tim McDaniel recently returned to his hometown of Seattle and reports with delight that he has just gotten engaged to be married. He works at the University of Washington, teaching English as a Second Language. This story—his first sale—leaves us wondering whether it is contemporary or Middle English he teaches.

Le Morte d' Volkswagyn

(A Newly Discovered Romance)

By Tim McDaniel

THERE RODE FOUR KNYGHTS of the Table Rounde, and the one in front hyght syr Dynadan, and the three reste hyght sir Gawayne, and hys brethirne syr Gaherys and sir Gareth of Orkenay. And thys goode felysshype rode nerehonde to a soupyrhyway where there was a hambergyr stond, that was yclept the Bergyr Kynge Perelous. And it was syr Gaherys seyde, "I woll stop at thys hambyrgyre stond and haff dyner."

"Nay, ye woll nat," seyde hys broder sir Gawayne. "For wete ye well thys is the Bergyr Kynge Perelous, wherethorow any good knyght that takys hys mete hayre wolde dye therefore of the gryse."

And syr Dynadan seyde unto sir Gareth, "We sholde axe Kynge Mark hayre at mete-whyle next, and so ryd goode syr Tristramys of hem."

"That is trowthe," sir Gareth ansyred hem. And hys brethirne made grete joy of thys, for kynge Mark was a false knyght, and ever sir Dynadan loved trew knyghts, and they hem ayen, and he was a grete skoffer and a passynge mery knyght. Also he dyd nat were lyfts on hys shos as lyke sir Launceslot ded, as he was nat an orgulous knyght.

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"Welle seyde," seyed syr Gawayne.

So the felyshyppe rode alonge the soupyrhyway, and anone cam thereas a Volkswagyn crewsynge alonge that hywaye. The dryver that was dryving that Volkswagyne was a sarezen, and oute the wyndowe helde hem a grate spere. And the dryver stoppyd and loked at the knyghts.

"I woll have ado with hem," seyde sir Gaherys. "For I thinke to encrese my worshyppe."

So he mad hym redy, and he feautyred hys spere and ren toworde that Volkswagyn. And they came togedyrs lyke wylde borys, and syr Gaherys spere brake all to pecis, and the sarezen smote hym clene off hys sadyll to the erthe.

"By my fayth, that ys a stronge dryver," seyde sir Gareth. "And yette I muste avenge my brodir." He dressid hys shelde and hys spere, and called to the dryver, "Dryver, make the redy!" And he cam at hem.

The dryver tornyd hys Volkswagynne, a myghty bugge, to face hem and feautyred hys spere and cam at syr Gareth of Orkenay. Sir Gareth braste hys spere on the Volkswagyns wyndeshelde, and the dryvere smote hym off hys horse so he felle in a swone.

"Now wan or ellis the odir of us muste have ado wythe hem," seyde sir Gawayne.

"I woll nat," seyde syr Dynadan. "For that dryvere hath smote downe bettir knyghts than I, and so I thinke we nat be welle macched. It wolde be my shame."

"Than I woll avenge my brodirs," seyde sir Gawayne. And he dressid hys shelde and hys spere afore hem, and cam at that Volkswagynne wyth all the myght of hys horse. And the Volkswagyn cam lycke at hem, and they cam togedyrs lycke thundir. And sir Gawayne was smote downe, but he avoyded hys sadyll and cam lyghtly to hys feete. And the Volkswagynne stopped, and syr Gawayne drew hys swerde and smote the wyndeshelde wyth hit, and it braste. And sir Gawayne smote the hoode, and hit dentyd and foule steem cam oute thereof, the whyche was passinge straunge, for cause Vollswagynes are bedaysshed nat wyth radiatoors of watir, the which betoken that thys was a magick veehikel.

Then the dryvere that was dryvyng that Volkswagyn was full wroth, and he ded nat leve hys carre but pyushyd the gasse pedall downe, and tryed he to trample syr Gawayne undir hys wheelys. But syr Gawayne

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leped onto the hoode of the Volkwagynne bugge, and swung hys goode swerd Galantyne thorow the brokyn wyndeshelde and smote off the dryveres head. And the Volkswagynne stylle moved, so syr Gawayne leped to the erthe ayen. And the Volkswagyn ren a pace, and anone hit strake a tyllyfone pole a grete blow, and both the pole and the Volkswagynne were to-braste.

"That was in trowthe a straunge encountir," seyde sir Dynadan, and anone the fayre knyghts of the fellyshyppe were mounted ayen on ther horsys. Rode they then unto the kynges courte at Camelot, to telle Kynge Arthure of there mervalyis aventure.

Explicit the tayle of Le Morte d'Volkswagynne

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Those of you who have had the good fortune to encounter Mr. Spencer's fiction before probably flipped directly to this page, for the wit and charm of books like Zod Wallop *and* Résumé with Monsters *tend to make fans fanatical. William Browning Spencer is a resident of Austin, Texas, and his other books include a story collection entitled* The Return of Count Electric *and most recently an unusual dark fantasy entitled* Irrational Fears. *He says he does not plan out short stories, they "just happen." They happen much too infrequently, but we're pleased that this unusual tale about the redemptive power of poetry happened our way.*

The Foster Child

By William Browning Spencer

1

I CAME, THE HOPE OF MY tribe, to the City of Absolutes, in the year of the zero plus two big and a nine. I sought Lena, the girl I had dreamed of as my fingers grew back and I drifted in the waters of Nagoda.

They had killed us long and hard, and scattered what was killed, and howled long prayers over our heads so that, even dead, we grew demoralized and let the enduring truth leak from our essence, as blood leaks from the sky-cracked hands of our prophets.

Had the rivers been less vigilant, we would have blown away, without the strength to even add a voice to the black wind. But the mother rivers caught us and carried us down to Nagoda, just enough of us to make this one, and I call myself Yeats, after a singer from the north who abandoned the name to walk naked through the Country of Dead Trees.

At the gates of the city, I was halted.

I dissembled, saying: "I am a trader from Magoth. I bring gold to trade for

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machine thoughts wrought by your high engineers in the Temple of Bytes."

"Give us some of your gold," they said, "and we will let you pass."

This I did, but then, being imperfect, I killed them anyway, and separated their limbs from their bodies, according to custom.

I should not have done this. Now they knew I was in the city, and their servants would seek me.

I went immediately to the Garden of News and lay down in a rented coma. There the voice visited me.

"What do you need to know, my son?"

"Oh holy Network," I cried. "I need to know why it must go on, why this getting and spending? The stillness between the stars is our true delight and peace."

"We thought you all were killed," the Network said. "We thought the Void of Incoherence had claimed you and all your generations."

"No," I said. "I am alive and seeking one, Lena by name."

"Why?"

"Love. Implacable love. The line across which life leaps. She is our hope. She will restore our order."

"Flee this place," the Network said. "They come now, flying down the infrastructure."

The spiky shivers told me of their presence. Charred electrons, blue halitosis of ghost robots withered the stale air of the coma. I broke out, wires flapping, and ran down the Street of Philosophers.

I fled inward to the Reference Jungle at the edge of my enemy's lair. I wandered amid ancient paper runes and ragged scholars, one of whom recognized me.

"I fall at your feet," the old man said. "I humble myself, grovel, delete all dignity, that you might grant me a boon."

"Be quick," I said. "I am harried by circumstance."

"One question answered," the old man said, "no more. I have spent my life in worship of knowledge. Tell me, have I been wrong to do this?"

"Yes."

The man looked stricken, as though skewered by revelation. I moved on, into the Field of Arguments where my kind had once chosen to abide and where the greatest of us, Meta, had wounded the Earth and sought his own death, devoured by his students.

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I came to the Wall of Congruity, beyond which the wizard Nulson, misshapen, robbed of humanness, did nothing now but covet. And I knew that there I would find Lena, no more than a child.

I reached out and grasped the holohand that extended from the door. Cold ghosts rushed through me and stirred a thousand thousand memories.

"You are not dead, then," the voice said. "It is just as well. I am bored and sick of killing things that hold their lives no tighter than an infant holds a spoon. Come in."

"This time you will not kill me, Nulson," I said. My tongue, hampered by my mission, had difficulty speaking the words.

He glittered with laughter. Around the metal bulk of his person, in blue turbulence like small asteroids, a dust of old capacitors, resistors, ICs spun. "You come for the child."

"I come for the child," I said.

"And why?"

Pride made me tall. "Always this question. And who is its author? Even here, in this lamentable darkness, questions lurk. I come to answer them, of course. I come from love."

"Well there she lies, embraced by sleep. Claim her."

He moved aside, and I saw, in his motion, that he had grown much since our last encounter. All manner of things had accrued to him, wires and devices, some rusted, some gleaming still, some oscillating and humming.

I looked beyond him to the clear glass from which Lena's frozen face, pale as desire in an old man's heart, stared with frosted eyes.

Three tentacles spun out, silver, segmented, and as the first fell on my shoulder I drew my sword and swung. Sparks gauded the darkness and seared the air. The second tentacle wrapped thickly round my thigh; the third one girded my waist.

I struck again and my sword shattered. A dull electric current sought to paralyze me — a new trick this — and I fell down. I was pulled, knees skidding across the concrete, toward my hated foe.

"What made you think you could defeat me? What made you think it would be different?" he roared.

He drew me to him.

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"The last time I died, I learned," I said. "What good is death if some wisdom does not adhere to the dying?"

"What good indeed!" my enemy roared. "Die in vain twice over."

He drew me to the grinding gears, the teeth that processed blood and flesh and bone.

"I learned where the rat hides in his maze," I said, and I spit the homing dart from my mouth, through the lattice work of steel, through the one opening, to where that memory of a monkey shape still lodged. Nulson himself, atrophied, sequestered in his cage within the cybernetic monster he had sprouted, screamed — this was a violent poison that boiled the blood — and a great straining and crying out of metal filled my ears, and I toppled sideways amid blue smoke and the buckling thunder of exploding circuits.

I rose amid the rubble and walked to the glass case and found the secret of it and opened it. I kissed Lena on the forehead and studied her frost-glazed eyes.

2

"You may be the best teacher in the world, Mr. Wilson, but I am afraid that you cannot help my child," Mrs. Jamerson said.

The young man put the cup of tea down and regarded the woman. She was pretty, and he could see an echo of the much-photographed child in her, but worry had aged her, and her blue eyes looked beyond him to some repeated tragedy.

"I've read the articles, of course; the media coverage brought her to my attention. And the institution has briefed me thoroughly," he said.

The woman sighed and ran her hands across the fabric of her dress. Such a well-appointed house, such a decorous woman, such sadness. "Yes, there has been much written about Lena," Mrs. Jamerson said. "So many words, as though a million words could explain her, solve her. Words like 'savant.' But Lena is only Lena, only herself."

"Can I see her?"

"I suppose there is no reason you shouldn't." Lena's mother put down her teacup and stood up. "This way, please."

John Wilson followed her down a hallway. They passed a framed

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photo of Mr. & Mrs. Jamerson, waving from a yacht — the same photo the newspapers had run, the same photo John Wilson had studied just yesterday. *It must be painful to keep it there,* John thought. *An act of deliberate courage, perhaps.*

Less than a week after that photo was taken, the yacht had been destroyed in a storm. Lena Jamerson — two years old — had fallen into the ocean, and her father had lost his life trying to save her. Lena had survived, but near drowning, oxygen deprivation, had done some damage. She was not the same. And it was this alteration that drew the newspapers, always hungry for the unique, the bizarre, the uncanny.

"Lena," Mrs. Jamerson said, ushering John Wilson into the room. "I've brought you a visitor."

The room was decorated with posters of animals. Sunlight streamed through a window, falling on a doll that sat crookedly in a small white chair.

A little girl, dressed in a blue smock with white knee-length socks and white tennis shoes, sat cross-legged on a canopied bed. Her hair was pale blond, almost white, and combed to a sunstruck luster. She was staring straight in front of her and her eyes were the blue one encounters when breaking the ocean's surface after diving off a boat somewhere in the Caribbean.

"She has always been the most beautiful girl in the world," her mother said, speaking from behind him. "There is nothing about Lena that is not extraordinary. You know, as a baby, she did nothing but laugh. I believe, on occasion, I heard her giggle when I was carrying her, months before her birth."

"She is a princess," Wilson said. She was like a china figurine, an enchanted fairy.

"She does not relate to the world around her. She is amused but passive. She smiles often, laughs, but she is unaware of our presence. She can feed herself. She is toilet trained. Oh, in many respects, she is the model child. But she sleepwalks through her life." Lena's mother walked to the bed, sat down, and put her arms around her daughter, who continued to stare straight ahead, hands primly nested in her lap.

"A year ago, at the age of five, she spoke. My sister and I were at the breakfast table. Lena said, 'Thou still unravished bride of quietness, thou foster-child of silence and slow time.'"

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Wilson nodded. "Keats. The beginning of 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'."

"Hardly 'Mommy,'" Lena's mother said. "Those were the first words she ever uttered. My sister is a professor of English literature — as the more skeptical reporters noted immediately — and she recognized the quote. But I assure you, as I have assured a horde of doubters, that we did not coach her. Since then any number of investigators, including some from the institution with which you are affiliated, Mr. Wilson, have satisfied themselves that Lena speaks only in fragments of poetry and that she ranges across all nationalities and times. If you are yet another man determined to expose a fraud, you are doomed to failure. Lena does not read; she has not been exposed to these poets. This is not a 'savant' syndrome; Lena is not one of those children with greatly impaired mental faculties who can mimic classical piano pieces after one listening. In Lena's case, there is no source to mimic."

"Yes," he said, "It is incredible."

The first touch of anger darkened his hostess's voice. "And how do you explain it?"

"Well. I'm not sure that anyone can explain it. It is mysterious."

"Then you haven't given it sufficient thought, Mr. Wilson. Your institution should have asked a poet. Any poet could have told them that Lena simply listens to the Muse. She is not quoting William Blake or Shakespeare or Milton or anyone else. My Lena is listening to the source of all inspiration. The Muse is dictating to her directly. Don't poets say their visions come from some mysterious otherworld? Well, my poor Lena has been shouted deaf by that mystery voice, that voice poets call the Muse."

Lena's mother drew the child to her and hugged her tightly. Eyes wet now, emotion in her voice, she addressed Wilson as though the whole of science, in all its vanity, stood before her. "You can't do anything for her. You say you are a teacher? Wonderful. Will you teach her to quote 'Dover Beach'? Hah! Better if you can teach her how to poison this Muse. Teach her how to kill the voice within her. Teach her how to return to her mother and her aunt, to hear our unrhymed voices that love her and call her name every day, and get no answer and watch our beautiful child drift further and further from us."

"I understand your feelings," Wilson said. "But, without wishing to

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raise false hopes, I think I might be able to help. People...people talk to me."

Mrs. Jamerson regarded him with a weary smile. She said, "I think you have met your match."

"I would like to come here every day," he said. "I would like to take Lena on some outings, picnics, that sort of thing."

Mrs. Jamerson lifted her child in her arms, stroking the child's bright hair. "You can do no harm, I suppose."

3

The trees had turned to explosive reds, yellows like pennants in a festive football crowd. There was smoke in the autumn air. Lena's mother had dressed Lena warmly, a green sweater, corduroy pants. Wilson held Lena's hand as they stood there on the side of the mountain. It was a sign of Mrs. Jamerson's trust in him that she no longer accompanied them on their outings.

"Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?" he quoted.

"O body swayed to music, O brightening glance, how can we know the dancer from the dance?" Lena said, completing the quote.

Wilson had learned this trick, so gratifying at first and now, two months later, so frustrating, so heartbreaking. Here was Lena, relating, logically and absolutely, to his voice. Feedback!

He would say, "Light breaks where no sun shines," and Lena would seem to answer, her small voice like a hallelujah choir in his ears: "Where no sea runs, the waters of the heart push in their tides."

So gratified was Wilson that he immediately showed this trick to Mrs. Jamerson, and so he instilled false, cruel hopes. Lena was still remote, a good-humored little ghost, indifferent to her surroundings and to the desperate affection and suffering of those who loved her. He reproached himself now for announcing this parlor trick of triggered quotes as though it were real progress.

Recently he had been plagued by bad dreams. He seemed to be losing a battle with time; a dreadful sense of urgency would suddenly slam him awake at three in the morning. Sweating, suspecting some intruder had invaded his small apartment, he would get up and turn on all the lights and

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search the entire house, even opening dresser drawers — as though this invading menace might be the size of a rat, a serpent.

Still, it was a beautiful North Carolina autumn and it was a sacrilege to waste it with night-fears and negativity. The poems he knew were English, and many of them too sedate for such a day, but Gerald Manley Hopkins would do. "The world is charged with the grandeur of God," he shouted, lifting Lena and swinging her in a circle.

"It will flame out like shining from shook foil!" Lena shouted back.

For a while he forgot all his failures. They ate their packed lunches under a bright, warming sun. A scattering of crows raced like schoolboys to a recess bell, over the sky and away in a clamor of raucous voices.

4

I had freed her from the wizard Nulson and carried her from the city. Her limbs were still cold, despite the tropical Contested Zone we traveled through, and when I lay in near-death trance, in the House of Solemnity to which I had brought the child, I found the door of her mind swung open on an empty room. She had tired of her imprisonment, and she had leapt recklessly toward the abyss. She had neglected the memory pinions; the cables of desire had been cast off, and so she spun away like a kite that snaps its string, unmoored and beyond all returning.

I screamed awake, breaking the circuits of trance-net with such ferocity that small flames ignited in the encumbering sheets.

"Gone!" I screamed. "Lost!"

My host, Portheria, reprimanded me: "Please, less despair," she urged. "My kin-shepherds are sensitized to you and your quest. You've bruised many of them."

I apologized to the cowled monks, and, still abstracted, walked to Lena, sleeping in her web, all our new-brood hopes imperiled by her abandonment. "Oh, Queen," I sighed, "We are numb with knowledge. The world is dying in the knowing of things. All the waters of love, of empathy, are drained by tireless, inhuman engines. Children are crushed under the wheels without a whimper, and their parents do not weep. We need your Holy Compassion. Only compassion and love can save us. Just

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yesterday Volander Inc. merged with Welger Limited and the acid vats claimed two hundred thousand superfluous employees."

The dream child said nothing. Portheria touched my shoulder.

"Despair perhaps later," she said. Her words were always awkward in the air, but she was the greatest empath in the empire, and so her thoughts cut with clarity into my troubled mind. "My kin-shepherds and I can find her yet. We will task our energies to all limits."

"The universes are so wide," I said, unwilling to rise to the bait of hope.

"We will weave a great net of words," Portheria said. "We will fish for her in all the languages of dreams, down all the years, with all the love and sorrow that she must hunger for."

And so I retired apart from them, prepared for a wait of some years — knowing that our world unraveled at a quicker pace.

5

"You are a stubborn young man," Mrs. Jamerson said, speaking into the phone. "But I think there is some virtue in acceptance. It is time to admit that Lena has defeated you. She remains aloof and alone, my impossible child."

John Wilson had come to know Mrs. Jamerson well. He marveled at the woman's courage, and felt a genuine, ever-growing affection.

"I want to come by tomorrow around noon and take Lena to meet a friend of mine," Wilson said.

Mrs. Jamerson sighed. "Another scientist, I suppose. Another student of the mind. Oh John, let it go."

"I want Lena to meet Sara Palliser. Sara has won a Pulitzer Prize, so you might be familiar with the name. She is a poet."

"What do you hope to accomplish, John?"

"Mrs. Jamerson," John Wilson said, "probably nothing. But I remembered something you said. You said that Lena doesn't quote the poetry of individual poets. She goes to the Muse, the source of inspiration, and there finds the same poems that have bloomed in the hearts and minds of our great bards. So...suppose...Sara Palliser is a friend of mine. I had lunch with her yesterday, and she spoke of an unfinished poem. She said to me,

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'It is not really unfinished, of course. Somewhere it is complete. I just have to unearth the rest of it.' And I thought — it burst upon me — that Lena would know where the rest of the poem was. If she and Sara...well, you see, if they could go there together, if they made the journey at the same time, under hypnosis — Dr. Byrne at the institution would serve as a guide — then they could talk to one another. Sara Palliser could speak to Lena. Lena could answer."

"John — "

"Tomorrow at noon. See you then." John Wilson hung up.

6

I was awakened from a deep slumber. The whisper moths that had been drawn by my dreams fluttered away to drift in a pink cloud high above my head.

"We have found her," Portheria said. There was an anxiety in her tone that should not have accompanied such news.

"What is wrong? What year is it?"

"We've found her soon enough," said Portheria, anticipating my fear. "But you must act immediately. There is one there, well-intentioned but ignorant of the forces at risk, who is prepared to draw her into the new world she inhabits. He has found a singer who — we all agree — can awaken her. Once awakened to her new home, she will be lost to us forever."

"I go then," I said. "Show me the quadrant and I will surrender my will to your soul-steering."

7

Wilson could not sleep that night. He got up and turned the radio on. A flurry of static crackled in the cold night of the apartment and then an organ-voiced version of "Silent Night" flared to sudden clarity. He had forgotten that Christmas was only a week away. He would have to buy presents for his parents, his sister, a few friends.

Wilson went to turn the radio off — the music of the season somehow saddened him — but then another burst of static, and a voice, or no voice

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at all but something like an articulate wind, said, "That is no country for old men."

And Wilson slept late the next morning, and awoke feeling sluggish and thinking that this dullness heralded the beginning of a cold.

And as he drove over to see Mrs. Jamerson and fetch her daughter, a few large flakes of snow spiraled down from an overly bright sky.

Mrs. Jamerson greeted him at the door. She threw her arms around him. "I've talked to Lena," she said.

She began to cry, sobbing against Wilson's shoulder. "If she can live there whole, then she must go there of course."

"I don't understand," Wilson said. "Just what did she say? How did it come about?"

Wilson stopped. A black bird perched on the sofa arm next to Lena. Lena raised her head, and instantly Wilson saw recognition, felt his heart reverberate as though some vast, inaudible chord resounded within.

"Say the words, John Wilson," Lena urged.

He spoke them as though born with them, suddenly savant himself. He knew then, that this was the last poem they would share.

"That is no country for old men," he began.

"...therefore I have sailed the seas and come to the holy city of Byzantium," Lena said, her words enlivened by the fire in her blue eyes.

I know what's coming, John Wilson thought.

Her last words were whispered, "...of what is past, or passing, or to come."

"Good-bye, Mother, good-bye, John Wilson," she said. Her image had already begun to fade.

The nightingale hopped to the child's shoulder where it too dimmed.

Mrs. Jamerson spoke from behind Wilson. "There is nothing about Lena that is not extraordinary," she said, pride trembling in her voice. "They bow down to her in Byzantium."

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"Then I add the potassium sulfate..."

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FILMS

KATHI MAIO

AND A GOOD TIME WAS HAD BY ALL

LET US NOW praise stupid movies. No, I am not referring to the stupidity exhibited by the majority of American films — a lack of coherence and intelligence that is completely unintentional. I am, instead, alluding to movies that are purposefully silly in the hopes of entertaining an audience.

These films don't necessarily wish to move us to the depth of our emotions, nor do they hope to provoke in us deep thoughts. They are shallow, and proud of it. A chuckle, a sigh, and two hours away from our worldly troubles is all they offer. And, speaking personally, I have never needed that more.

I am not alone in this feeling. Which is why an sf/espionage pastiche like Mike Myers's *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me* did such boffo box-office last summer. Mr. Myers is a very funny man. And the screenplay for his sequel to *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery* (1997), which he co-wrote with Michael McCullers, is often very funny stuff. Full of sight-gags, double-entendres, potty humor, and every bit of comic shtick available to man (and, let's face it, this is not the kind of movie women tend to write), *Austin Powers* was a hoot and a half.

Nevertheless, it was more an extended comedy sketch than a feature film. Even as I laughed, I found the rhythm of gag-punchline-naughty quip, gag-punchline-naughty quip, just a wee bit monotonous. Yet it was easy to see why Mr. Myers chose to be so relentless with his jokes and japes. He was hoping none of us would pay the least attention to his storyline (relating to Dr. Evil's theft of dear Austin's mojo), which

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was insubstantial, to say the least.

The thing is, I *did* notice. And that's what made *The Spy Who Shagged Me* a less than completely satisfying movie for me. Perhaps, what I want is an oxymoron: Intelligent Stupidity, Thoughtful Mindlessness. However it is expressed, I know that although I truly enjoy a just-for-fun film, I still want it (on some basic level) to be a meaningful movie experience. I want a real story, and not just a screen version of the *Mammoth Book of Jokes*.

Hey, I don't ask for much! Just a lightweight film with a bit of narrative heft to it. And, once in while, I even get it. As I did with a holiday season release called *Galaxy Quest*. It had an honest-to-gosh story to tell. (A totally wacky one, it's true. But so much the better.) And, in the real clincher, this particular fable was good-hearted as well as witty.

Like the Powers spy comedies, *Galaxy Quest* is, superficially, a genre parody. In this case, David Howard and Robert Gordon have written a pastiche of the *Star Trek* phenomenon. For a few short years in the late seventies and early eighties, they tell us, a show called *Galaxy Quest* played on network television. And that episodic space opera featured an all-too-familiar cast of adventurous jumpsuited archetypes.

Commander Peter Quincy Taggart was the natural-born leader; fearless and just a little too self-important. He was played by Jason Nesmith (Tim Allen). Lt. Tawny Madison was the token space-babe; blonde, stacked, and there for display purposes (and the occasional conversation with the spaceship's voice-responsive computer). That role went to Gwen DeMarco (Sigourney Weaver). A classically trained British actor named Alexander Dane (Alan Rickman) won the part of the crew's highly logical resident alien, Dr. Lazarus, and lived to rue the day. (All that makeup to wear! And stupid lines like "By Grabthar's hammer, by the suns of Warvan, you shall be avenged!" to spout...time after time!) And rounding out the multicultural cast was Tommy Webber (Daryl Mitchell) as Laredo, and Fred Kwan (Tony Shalhoub) as Tech. Sergeant Chen.

Like the actors who played the original shipmates on *Star Trek*, the cast members of *Galaxy Quest* have never been able to shake their identification with their short-lived television roles. But unlike William Shatner, Leonard Nimoy, and their other real-life counterparts,

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the Questors never had a movie franchise to maintain their incomes. So they are trapped in the "special appearance" hell of opening electronics superstores and traveling the convention circuit.

The film's early scenes, which take place at an sf fan convention, contain its most pointed satire. But although they are on target, the filmmaker's shots at fandom display no mean-spiritedness. Like last year's documentary, *Trekkies*, *Galaxy Quest* is dumbfounded by the devotion of the obsessive fan. And yet it treats sf fanatics with so much exasperated affection and respect that no Trekker could take offense at the ribbing. And the same is true of the way the movie mildly mocks a group of "has-been" actors trapped in their hackneyed roles.

In the end, both groups — sf fans and sf actors — prove to be the brave heroes of a "real life" outer-space adventure, which starts when an amiable band of black-clad, pasty-faced folk show up at the convention. Although they look like just another group of costumed crazies, these newcomers are actual aliens: Thermians from the Klatu Nebula. Led by the beaming Mathesar (Enrico Colantoni), they approach "Commander Taggart" for help in saving their race from a merciless invader named Sarris (Robin Sachs, completely hidden in a sensational lobster/cockroach creation from Stan Winston and his wizards).

At first, Nesmith thinks the Thermian job is just another personal appearance gig for a fan group with a good budget and a little too much enthusiasm for role-playing. His hosts have done an excellent job at replicating Taggart's spaceship, *The Protector*. (In fact, their copy looks even better than the original set.) But, before long, Nesmith gets an inkling that he has fallen down the rabbit hole — or up a worm hole — into another world. What fun! (Or so he still thinks.) And, of course, he wants to share his high old time with his former castmates.

At this point, the film shifts away from simple parody to something closer to a traditional *Star-Trek*ian-style, valiant struggle, plot. But, all the while, it repeatedly, and quite humorously, plays with the plot conventions of old sf television...with good reason, as it turns out. It seems that the Thermians have based their environment — nay, their entire society — on the model provided them by the old "Galaxy Quest" series. Here we have the ultimate sf fans! To Mathesar and his cohorts, these intercepted TV transmissions were

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no mere fiction. They were "historical documents" offering a design for living.

And when the group of Earthling actors steps through their own cultural looking glass, they are at first bemused, then disoriented, then terrified by their situation. Happily, in the end, our crew meets the challenge. They are able to live up to their fictional characters, and then some — with a little help from their earthbound fans and the gentle Thermian people.

Helmer Dean Parisot *(Home Fries)* maintains a light touch throughout. But his tone, mercifully, never degrades to arch campiness. Instead, the director embraces the heart of fantasy, which is belief. A true "quest," he seems to tell his audience, is never just a battle against an evil force, it is a process of personal growth for all the characters involved. Sigourney Weaver says that Parisot told her that their story was "like the *Wizard of Oz*. Each of these people lacks something important, and they can only get it by sticking with each other and going through this adventure."

He's right. And that's what transforms this Trekkian parody into quite the heartfelt action comedy. That, and the fact that the movie is well-written and ably directed, with solid production values. The special effects are worthy of special mention. I found them delightfully cheesy in the original TV show clips, and wonderfully realistic in the rest of the film. (A rock monster that makes two quite dramatic appearances is a particularly impressive creation.)

Since I've already listed the primary players, it may go without saying that *Galaxy Quest* is also skillfully acted. Sigourney Weaver is, well, Sigourney Weaver. She can't help but impress. But it's quite a treat to see her having so much fun playing the "Anti-Ripley." The distinguished Ms. Weaver makes quite the bodacious babe in her silicone-enhanced bra and her blonde wig. Still, she can't help but bring strength and intelligence to a part most actresses would have played as a straight-out bimbo.

Alan Rickman, a personal favorite, glowers marvelously as Alexander Dane. (You can almost see him writing a book called *I Am Not Lazarus!)* And I also enjoyed Tony Shalhoub as the baffled but amused Fred Kwan. But my favorite character was a guy called Guy, played by Sam Rockwell. A series bit-player, mistakenly transported into the star ensemble's real deep-space

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mission, Guy is initially thrilled to be part of the show again. But as he grasps the reality of their peril, he is horrified by the blithe innocence of the others. ("Didn't you guys ever *watch* the show?" he asks, as he pulls Gwen away from a tribe of deceptively teletubby-ish aliens.) Moreover, his fears are completely justified. As a bit player, poor Guy realizes that he alone is the expendable one, destined — by plot convention — to die.

But the film's biggest surprise is Tim Allen. I've never been particularly impressed by Allen's acting. But playing Buzz Lightyear, twice, must have given the former sitcom and standup star all the preparation he needed for this particular role. Allen gets the egotism and insecurities of his Shatnerish role just right. The real pleasure comes from seeing his Jason Nesmith develop into a man of mettle, worthy of the title "Commander."

Make no mistake, *Galaxy Quest* is no cinematic masterpiece. Who wants it to be? It is enough that it is a first-rate trifle of a movie. It doesn't insult our intelligence, but neither does it ask us to think too much about what we're watching. It invites us simply to sit back and be entertained.

I watched *Galaxy Quest* with a general audience who gave it a spontaneous ovation as the credits rolled. I can honestly say that as we all ebulliently filed out of the theater, I got the feeling that a good time was had by all.

High praise, indeed.

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Joyce Carol Oates is the author of several dozen novels and story collections, the most recent of which is Blonde, *a fictionalized examination of the life of Marilyn Monroe. Ms. Oates's last story for us was "Feral" in our September 1998 issue and like that tale, this new one takes us down into the heart of darkest America.*

In Shock

By Joyce Carol Oates

Woke in the ambulance
Didn't know what had hit me, and woke in the speeding ambulance
Speaking of the accident (as she would afterward call it, when she spoke of it at all) she intended to give, to friends, an account of her own folly. How impulsive she was. Yet brave. Yet reckless. *Woke in the ambulance and the first thing I asked, Am I still alive?*

Rachael her name was spelled in the old way *R A C H A E L.*

Rachael this was a sign (she'd so interpreted it, since girlhood) of belonging to another, more significant time.

Rachael she was not a girl any longer. A woman who'd behaved, in an emergency, without due caution.

But the boy was hurt! I had to help him.

Yes. There was a boy!

What relief, to get outside! After the storm.

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She'd walked on Pine Ridge Road in the breathless aftermath of pelting rain, gale-force winds. Oh, but Rachael felt good, outdoors after that long thunderous night! Her breath steamed. For mid-April, it was damned cold. But blindingly bright. The storm had been blown away. The sun, pale and opalescent, looked to have been washed clean. Everywhere were puddles glaring with light like broken pieces of mirror. The road was strewn with storm debris. Fallen limbs of trees, enormous branches, an uprooted, aged pine. A heavy pine bough had crushed a neighbor's mailbox. Tree branches were twined in telephone lines that drooped as in a surreal work of art. Beside the road high tension wires hung loose, crackling dangerously, giving off visible sparks. Rachael heard a warning sound as of a hive of maddened wasps.

In the night she'd heard the Harpie-cries. Spirits of storm that carry souls to Hades.

Hiking now in the center of the road, where there were fewer puddles. This was a semi-rural, semi-suburban neighborhood built on a densely wooded glacial ridge above a city of forty thousand inhabitants, in eastern Pennsylvania. Most of the houses on Pine Ridge Road were small mansions originally built by railroad and mining executives in the early decades of the twentieth century; made of sandstone, or limestone, or brick-and-stucco, or granite. Some of these old houses were in immaculate condition; others were weatherworn and grimy, with peeling paint, rotting shutters and roofs, overgrown shrubbery and scrawny evergreens. The part-timbered Tudor house belonging to Rachael's parents was neither in immaculate condition nor was it a neighborhood eyesore, but its leaky roof did need repair and its living room fireplace had been a kind of inverted fountain during the storm, spewing sooty rainwater out onto the floor. Rachael had been alone in the house, up from Philadelphia for the weekend. Her parents, retired, lived in Florida. They were reluctant to sell the house, which had been built in 1911 by Rachael's father's grandfather, and Rachael hadn't pushed them, though the high property tax had become her burden. As a portion of her parents' expenses, in their retirement village in Coral Gables, had become her burden. One by one the elegant old houses of Pine Ridge were being sold to developers to be ignominiously razed and replaced by smaller houses or condominiums. It was only a matter of time before the De Long house was sold, too. Rachael

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knew. She wasn't a sentimental person. But to sell the house would be to break forever with the past and Rachael wasn't ready for that, yet.

For once the past is gone it's gone. Time seemed to her a sickle-shaped shadow like that caused by a lunar eclipse, swiftly passing over the earth's surface, over the startled faces of observers, no sooner glimpsed than gone.

Suddenly she was hearing a noise behind her, in the roadway. She'd been approaching the cul-de-sac of Pine Ridge Road where pines grew in profusion on a steep, rocky hill and no houses had ever been built, thinking it strange that no one else was out on this bright, blazing Sunday morning after an exhausting storm; hearing then a sound of movement behind her, and turning in surprise to see a boy on a shiny bicycle, pedaling furiously. The boy was no more than ten years old, with a pale, plumpish face and jaws set in a look of adult aggression. He'd come out of nowhere. He ignored Rachael, who had to step aside. Glassy blue eyes flicking toward Rachael and in the same instant away, as if she were of absolutely no significance to him though he'd nearly run her down. He was wearing a windbreaker with a hood, and his hands were bare. He pedaled his bicycle hunched over as if racing.

A cruel, crude face. In a child.

Rachael paused in the road, staring after the boy. Where was he going? The road dead-ended within a few hundred feet. How could parents allow a child so young to be riding a bicycle on this road, in such conditions? The boy was weaving his bicycle skillfully around tree debris, making a game of it, sharply turning his front wheel from side to side, now standing up on the pedals, shaking his handlebars as you might shake the reins of a horse, and crashing through less substantial branches in a flutter of wet leaves not seeming to mind if the new, shiny bicycle was getting scratched, or twigs were catching in the spokes. *That face. But not familiar.* Where? Rachael saw in horror that the boy was propelling his bicycle directly toward one of the loose wires that lay partly in the road, drooping down from a pole like a broken-backed snake. Before she could scream a warning, the front wheel of the bicycle ran over the wire, and immediately the rear wheel, she heard an outcry like that of an injured animal, and in the next instant both the boy and the bicycle fell over, skidding on the roadway; the shiny-spoked wheels were spinning.

"Are you hurt? Oh my God — "

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Rachael was crouching beside the boy, seeing his face had gone deathly white and his eyes had rolled back into his head. Had he stopped breathing? The broken wire, tangled in the front wheel of the bicycle, was making a high thrumming-buzzing sound. Not thinking of the risk to herself, Rachael tried to dislodge the boy from beneath the bicycle, in so doing leaned against the bicycle, and in that instant she was knocked backward as if she'd been struck, out of nowhere, a blow like a fiery comet.

IN HADES, the spirits of the dead have no speech and are blind and groping and of no more substance than sooty smoke. Your hand passes through them. If you try to embrace them, you embrace only air. Only by sipping blood can they simulate life, but only for a brief while. Then they fade away. The spirits of the dead not fully dead. But never again to be alive.

Didn't know what hit woke in the ambulance

Her mouth stiff as if she'd had a stroke. (Had she had a stroke?) *Asking am I alive am I still alive*? For she'd believed she must be dead. Or (this seemed quite logical at the time, though clearly it was a mad speculation) what had been Rachael had somehow been dislodged and jolted into another body, into another brain that didn't operate as Rachael's did. So, speaking, she could not shape the words she wished. These were stones too large for her mouth. Her tongue was too long for her mouth. The wailing siren was confused with the storm. Was it still night, and still the storm? She'd been standing at an upstairs window of the darkened old house as rain lashed furiously at the windowpane. She'd been headstrong as her parents used to scold her, with affection, and her former husband had scolded; she was impetuous, stubborn, unyielding without affection, standing at a window watching lightning, the night sky vividly illuminated by lightning like suddenly irradiated veins. Oh but her heart beat quickly, as thunder broke in deafening peals about her head! *I love to be alone. I love my aloneness.* And the next minute strapped onto a stretcher. Punishment for being headstrong, standing at a window during a thunderstorm, and alone.

Beside her crouching Charon the boatman with his fiery eyes.

* * *

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Rachael her name was spelled in the old way *R A C H A E L.*

Rachael she'd lost the baby at three months, two weeks and one day. She'd been a young woman in her mid-twenties at the time. A decade ago. She'd ceased grieving long ago. She was a poet and a translator and she traveled a good deal and she'd ceased grieving for what was lost, and irretrievable, as she'd ceased being a woman, a wife, a mother-to-be. The man who'd been her husband at that time and the baby's father had meant to console her. *Darling look as the doctor has said it's possibly for the best nature spontaneously abhors her errors* And Rachael laughed saying *Aborts, you mean aborts her errors* and her husband was offended by Rachael's laughter and by her tone of voice. *Aborts isn't that what I said, nature spontaneously aborts her errors* And Rachael asked calmly why is nature *her* why is nature *she*

The man who'd been her husband backed away. That look of revulsion in his eyes. *Your grief is seeking someone to blame you are an angry woman*

But Rachael was not an angry woman. Nor was she a morbidly grieving woman. She'd ceased dreaming of the lost baby, long ago. She remembered no dreams.

Am I am I alive? Not knowing who this person was. Gripping her limp icy hand. There was kindness proffered here. But was this a person, exactly. Her eyesight was blurred, she seemed to be squinting through steam. A shape in white, where the face should have been there was only gauzy light like the moon. *Am I*? *Is this — alive*? The medic (she would realize afterward who it was) had tried to answer her. He'd seemed to know what her garbled frightened words were. He'd tried to console her. Calling her *ma'am*, that was all she would remember clearly. *Ma'am* he'd maybe said *you're going to the hospital.* Plausible to imagine he'd said *Ma'am you're going to be all right just lie still.* She'd been taken by ambulance to a hospital long ago in another city hemorrhaging from between her legs. This time, it seemed she'd been struck by lightning having stood recklessly at a window, in an electric storm? In the old Tudor house on Pine Ridge Road where no one now lived? The lights that had been flickering had gone out suddenly. In darkness she'd made her careful way downstairs, and in a denser darkness she'd groped her way into the

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kitchen, to get a flashlight from a drawer. And candles: she'd lighted candles to read by. It would be difficult to sleep, that night. She'd tried to work (often, Rachael worked through the night, under ordinary circumstances) but the candlelight generated strange slanted shadows from her own hand onto the paper. She was translating Virgil, that book of the *Aeneid* in which Aeneas, guided by the Sibyl, visits the Underworld. Virgil's Latin seemed to the translator chill and unyielding as stone. Stones in her mouth. Stones she must suck, her only nourishment. This Underworld, sunk in feculent darkness. Monster-shapes abided there that were yet mere phantoms to be dispersed as empty air, if, like Aeneas, you had the power to dispel them. The souls of the unborn crowding near. Like the milling confusion of a subway platform in rush hour, if the lights had gone out. Infants wailing to be born who'd never been born, and would never now be born. They'd lost their chance forever.

Yes, Rachael was alive.

They smiled, assuring her. Telling her such good news.

She'd been admitted to an emergency room. She'd wakened fully, but confused, with a pounding headache. Her eyes felt to her like burst egg yolks. She was lying on a gurney, trying to sit up to protest, she wasn't hurt, why was she here? Feeling as if she'd been lifted twenty feet above the earth and let go.

Her crotch was damp, where pee had leaked in panicked dribbles out of her, at the time of her collapse. Embarrassing, before strangers.

"But — what happened to me?"

She was told what astonished her, yet made immediate sense: she'd suffered a severe shock when apparently she'd touched a live, broken electrical wire in the road near her house; she'd been knocked unconscious. Luckily for her, the shock hadn't been strong enough to kill her. Luckily for her, a neighbor had discovered her and called an ambulance. It was sheerly luck, too, that telephones were working on Pine Ridge Road and that an ambulance had been able to make its way through the storm debris in the city, to get to her in time.

In time. Rachael was listening anxiously, and with respect.

She would have time to ponder afterward what the terse expression *in time* meant.

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"I nearly died, then? Oh God."

An older doctor came to speak with her briefly. She listened to his voice that came to her from a distance, as if over a poor telephone line. Words carefully chosen and reasonable yet unwieldy as small stones being pushed through a viscous liquid. Rachael knew that something was wrong. Something was missing. What?

A nurse had given her a codeine tablet, still her head pounded with pain. She heard herself ask, almost inaudibly, "The boy, is he — ? Is he all right, too?"

The doctor asked her to repeat her question, which Rachael did.

"Boy? What boy?"

Rachael said, uncertainly, "A boy on a bicycle.... He'd been knocked out by the wire, too."

The doctor shook his head. "There was no boy brought into emergency."

"They didn't just leave him there, did they? I think he was badly hurt. I was afraid he'd stopped breathing...."

"Where was this boy, exactly?"

"Where I was! On Pine Ridge Road. Where the ambulance attendants found me."

"But there doesn't seem to have been a boy. I can check our records...."

"Of course there was a boy! About ten years old, riding a bicycle. I don't know many people in the neighborhood anymore, I didn't recognize him. He must have run over a broken wire and was shocked and fell and I went to help him, that's why I...was hurt. I must have touched the wire trying to help him."

Out of Rachael's earshot there was a consultation. She was sitting up now on the gurney. She was becoming agitated. An attendant from the emergency crew was summoned to speak with her and he too insisted there'd been no boy — "Only you, ma'am. In the road."

Rachael said, "But what happened to him? He was just a little boy. He couldn't have gotten up and walked away!"

"Ma'am, we didn't see any boy. Maybe he did just walk away?"

"No! Damn it, he was hurt. He was unconscious. His lips were blue. I was afraid he'd stopped breathing."

This was met with respectful silence.

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Rachael said, pleading, "Why won't you tell me what happened to him? I don't understand this."

"Ma'am, don't excite yourself. We'll take care of it. We'll check out there on Pine Ridge, and see."

Rachael said, trying to remain calm, "He was a boy of about ten. He'd ridden his bicycle over a fallen, live wire, and collapsed...and I tried to help him. That's all I remember." Her voice trailed off into silence. Suddenly, she was exhausted. Like a swimmer who has struggled to shore, reaching now for another's outstretched hand but too weak to take hold of it, to save herself.

WARNING SYMPTOMS FOLLOWING TRAUMA

prolonged headache/neckache
prolonged nausea/vomiting
dizziness/vertigo
rapid/erratic heartbeat
sleeplessness
depression/mood shifts
lack of appetite
difficulty in concentrating
difficulty in seeing
pupil of one eye larger than the other

If one or more of these symptoms are experienced by the patient within five days of trauma, contact a physician immediately.

She lay still while the electrocardiogram was administered by a nurse. Her heart had ceased beating for a few seconds as she'd lain helpless on the road unaware of the road or of her misbehaving heart but now (Rachael was certain) she was fully recovered, and her heart calmly beating at the core of her body had no secrets to reveal. *The boy? The boy died. That's why they were lying. Something to do with malpractice. Unless the boy recovered. Walked away and left her. Rode away on his bicycle, as a boy would. Forgot her, as a child might. Maybe the boy had played a prank? Ran Rachael down on his bicycle? The boy with the cruel, crude face. A*

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dog-boy, those jaws. Those eyes. But no: a child so young, an innocent. What had they done with his body?

The nurse was standing over Rachael, with a look of concern.

"Miss De Long? I'm going to run this test again."

And so she did, and Rachael was informed that her heart showed no abnormalities, and she said, politely, "I didn't think it did. But thank you."

Nature abhors, aborts her errors. You must see it's for the best.

Rachael was not a woman given to morbid brooding, she saw the logic of optimism.

THERE WAS her ex-husband L__. This man who'd devoured her heart. Approaching her as in panicked fury she stammered, "You! Get away from me! I don't know you! Why are you here! *Don't touch me.*"

She was calm enough to make a telephone call. In one of the waiting interims between tests. Telling friends in Philadelphia she'd be late for a dinner they'd planned, possibly she wouldn't make the evening at all, she was so sorry. When her friends asked what was wrong Rachael said with the cheerful evasiveness that was Rachael's usual style that it was nothing, her car seemed to be having engine trouble, and was being repaired. *And if I almost died this morning in a ridiculous accident, that's my secret.* It was mid-afternoon when finally she was discharged from the hospital. After having been a captive for hours. Unless it was days. Noting the date on a calendar: April 13. The strangeness of this fact struck Rachael who'd never before given it a moment's thought. Numbered days!

April 13. The answer to a riddle.

When first Rachael had been carried into the ER in her dazed, disoriented state, a woman with bluish stiffened lips and a slow, erratic pulse, gauzy white curtains had been drawn briskly shut around her, and when she'd tried to sit up, she was restrained; her heartbeat examined, her blood pressure taken, and a nurse with a blurred moonface tested her mental acuity by asking her the date. Rachael murmured with her stiff, numbed mouth that felt like cotton batting she knew it was April...a

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month called April. The month of Easter...(But what was "Easter"? She hoped she wouldn't be asked.) But the specific date eluded her. Next, the nurse asked Rachael if she knew the year and after some hesitation Rachael said, "Is it...2000 yet? I think it is." (Not that she knew what "2000" meant. It seemed to her the height of human vanity, to attempt to measure time.) The nurse smiled as if Rachael had at last said something clever, and made a notation on her chart.

She was free to leave.

She was declared free of injury and free, at least for the time being, of symptoms, and so she was free to leave. *Touching a live wire in the road, were you mad? Suicidal?* When they'd been married, L__ would have accused her. For anything that befell Rachael, an intelligent woman admired by friends and colleagues yet a woman not without problems, a woman fully human, her occasional illnesses, accidents, professional crises, any misfortune, L__ seemed at once to blame her for.

Why? I love you so much, that's why.

Any hurt or offense to you, I resent.

It was a three-mile taxi ride back to 88 Pine Ridge Road. Into the wooded hills above the aging industrial city where, in residential neighborhoods, storm damage was most evident. There were badly ravaged and split trees, toppled trees, fallen branches, flotillas of withering leaves, puddles glittering like ice. Clean-up crews were working noisily, grinding debris. Rachael was relieved to see electric company repairmen. It was four P.M. and the sun had shifted in a sky partly mottled with cloud, still there was blinding, blazing light; Rachael shielded her eyes. How chill and astringent the air, how refreshing! As after a cataclysm. Pine Ridge Road was partly cleared of debris. It looked to Rachael both familiar and unfamiliar like a scene in a film she'd seen long ago and could remember only in patches. *But I am here, alive. I am back.* For a confused moment Rachael wondered if she were someone else, in the taxi, returning to another house: the Chatham house, across the street from the De Long house.

Maybe L__ was here already. Awaiting her?

She asked the driver to drive a little farther, to turn around in the cul-de-sac. She stared hard at the stretch of road where, that morning, she'd

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suffered a shock from a broken, weirdly humming wire...where the boy had bicycled, and fallen. *I heard him cry out in pain. I did!*

The electric wire had been repaired, evidently. There was no sign of breakage. The road had been cleared of debris except for scattered leaves. Of course, the boy's bicycle was gone. No sign, that Rachael could see, of the accident.

It was disconcerting to discover that Rachael hadn't locked the door of her house. The side door, off the kitchen, which she always used. But of course that morning, going outside, she'd been certain she would be back within an hour. The placidity of the house she'd left behind seemed to mock her. *How trusting you were. Like any accident victim. So sure you'll return. Return to normal.* The kitchen clock read 6:20 in defiance of the "real" time. Which meant that power had been restored in this neighborhood for only about three hours. "At least, it's been restored."

Walking through the house which was like a distant country to her. She'd come so far. She was so tired! Switching off lights she'd left on. For now the power was restored and daytime lights looked silly. *There was a boy in the road. I saw him. I touched him.*

In the weeks to follow Rachael would think: if her parents had been summoned up from Florida, to identify their only daughter's body in the county morgue, it would have destroyed them. They were in their late seventies and increasingly vulnerable to illnesses, medical conditions, wayward emotions, shocks. *A stupid accident. So easily preventable. What was Rachael, that intelligent woman, thinking of!* At least, she'd spared her parents that.

L__ had come to the hospital. What if L__ came out to the house, how could she send him away?

L__, not a name Rachael allowed herself to speak aloud. Nor even to think, in solitude. For never again would she be vulnerable to the man. Never again to any man, in fact. She wasn't a woman dependent upon men. *I can love others. But I will never again be in love. I have that strength.*

Now she had time to think, it was a puzzle! How L__ had known Rachael had had an accident, and where she'd been taken. It was true, she'd called Philadelphia friends; but it made no sense to her, that they

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might have called L__, or even knew how to reach him. L__ had been living in California, so far as Rachael knew. Yet there the man was, in the hospital waiting room, approaching Rachael with that look of eager concern; a husbandly look, a look of love.

Love and appropriation.

Love and hunger. Greed.

Rachael had felt a flame pass over her brain, sheer emotion.

"Get away! I don't know you! Don't — touch me."

He hadn't touched her. He'd meant to, but seeing the look in her face, he had not.

That odd, hoarse whisper — "Rachael."

Hurt and puzzled by her behavior. Was this pretense? Six years. Sometimes, in a weakened state, Rachael confused the loss of their unborn baby with the divorce, as if the latter had precipitated the former. *Time can run backward. It's been known.* In her mid-twenties, Rachael had translated Sappho's lyrics; the ecstatic hurt, the love-pain, bittersweet memory, confused with her own harsher, far less romantic experience. When L__ had seemed about to take hold of Rachael's hands she'd pushed away from him with a cry as if in terror of being burnt.

L__ was forty-two or -three years old yet still youthful. Taller than Rachael by several inches; a man who'd always used his height in an adversarial manner. He was lithe, feral-faced and attractive; the kind of man at whom women glance hopefully, even when there is no hope. He had the olive-pale skin of Mediterranean ancestry but oddly fair, thin, floating hair, faded to a silvery brown, straggling past his collar. When Rachael had known him, he'd kept his hair neatly trimmed. He'd been an aggressive attorney, moderately successful though never quite so successful as he'd wished. His eyes were dark and deep-set behind blue-tinted glasses. His mouth was thin-lipped and satirical. Yet approaching Rachael that day L__ had seemed genuinely concerned, and not at all satirical or mocking. Rachael was reminded, in the first seconds of seeing him, before fully recognizing him, of Bellona the jackal-headed Egyptian god of death; that sinister but noble heraldic figure she'd once been fascinated by, on an ancient funeral urn in the British Museum.

Fascinated that the colors of the figure, earth-brown, red-brown, black, should be so distinct, after thousands of years.

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But L__ hadn't followed Rachael. (There were hospital security guards close by.) He hadn't been anywhere in sight when the taxi arrived. (At least, Rachael hadn't seen him.)

This day of shocks and dislocations.

Did I imagine him, too? I did not.

Never would she forgive L__. Who after her miscarriage had rarely made love to her again. As if her womb were damaged. In time she learned that her husband had been unfaithful to her with a number of women. Casual affairs. For sex was casual to him, evidently. Love was casual. And ephemeral. An illusion? *You dare not believe, ever again.* The last Rachael had heard of L__ he'd purchased or been given, by a wealthy benefactress, thousands of acres of land in the Sierra Nevada Mountains near Redding, California. A stark, beautiful landscape Rachael had seen only in photographs. She'd heard that he had remarried, a younger woman. (Of course.) It was rumored he'd quit practicing law. Did he have children? He might even have divorced again, or his new wife died. He'd remarried. He was in some way involved with an artists' colony; or was it a religious community of some obscure sort, in those remote mountains?

Rachael smiled. She couldn't imagine L__ in any religious community unless L__ was himself the object of adoration.

Never again in love. But I can love!

Before leaving for Philadelphia, Rachael visited her neighbor Edith Chatham who'd called 911 to summon an ambulance for Rachael that morning. Thank you for saving my life! Rachael murmured, stricken by shyness, even as Mrs. Chatham herself seemed embarrassed, shaking her head and murmuring what a fright it had been! — she'd gone outside to inspect damage done to her tulip trees, and happened to see a body, a person, lying out on the road. "I knew at once what it was. Those terrible, loose electric wires." Mrs. Chatham's house was even older than the De Long house, a large, weatherworn colonial that smelled inside of something medicinal, with an undercurrent of mothballs and talcum powder. Mrs. Chatham was in her late sixties, within Rachael's memory a vivacious and sociable neighbor of Rachael's parents, with children grown and moved away, as Rachael had done; she asked Rachael about her parents whose names she got wrong, and about Rachael's grandparents

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who'd been deceased, as Rachael gently explained, for twenty years. "Oh, dear! I should have known. I haven't seen them for a while." (Was this meant to be funny? Mrs. Chatham was so eager and grim, Rachael didn't think so.) Rachael had been thinking that Mrs. Chatham was a widow, but apparently she was not: Mr. Chatham, an invalid, existed in a forcible way, calling out to his wife querulously from an adjoining room where, it seemed, he was watching TV. Mrs. Chatham took no notice of him though he cried "Edith! E-*dith*!" repeatedly. Rachael tried to ask the older woman whether she'd seen a boy on the road, too; a boy who'd fallen from his bicycle, and might have been injured; but Mrs. Chatham, intent upon serving Rachael tea and fine-sliced fruitcake, though Rachael had explained she couldn't stay for more than a few minutes, continued to chatter about other things. *I am her first visitor in a long time. Her own daughter has abandoned her.* Mrs. Chatham wasn't yet an elderly woman but her plump, once-pretty, babyish face had a fuzzy look as if it were melting; her small close-set eyes were vague and startled, like flickering light bulbs in danger of burning out. She talked repeatedly of having found Rachael in the road and not recognizing her; she sighed, and pressed her ring-laden hand against her bosom, marveling how lightning had come so close the previous night, she'd been terrified, certain it had struck — "And all of us electrocuted in our beds. Never knowing what hit us." In the adjoining room Mr. Chatham, whom Rachael recalled as a once-dapper, handsome businessman, who'd been friendly with Rachael's father, continued to mutter and curse, TV voices confused with his. Rachael made a show of sipping bitter black Ceylon tea, trying to listen to the older woman's meandering conversation, even as she was distracted by a large, faint, wine-colored stain on the carpet near her feet. This was a beautiful dusty-rose Chinese carpet that must have been an antique, worth many thousands of dollars. The stain was Alaska-shaped and looked fresh, pulsating with the beat of Rachael's blood. She said nervously, "I hope I didn't track that dampness in here. On my feet." Mrs. Chatham frowned. "Dampness? Where?" Rachael didn't want to point out the stain; for perhaps there was no stain; only when she narrowed her eyes did she see it, and then not clearly but as one might see something in memory. *But it isn't mine. Not my memory.* In the other room, Mr. Chatham groaned angrily. How was it possible that Mrs. Chatham didn't hear him? Rachael

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was the daughter of older parents, born when her mother was over forty; she understood the eccentricities of her elders, and had never judged her parents so harshly as her adolescent friends had judged theirs; yet, still, Mrs. Chatham's behavior was...strange.

With the excuse of wanting to look out the window at storm damage outside the house, Rachael got to her feet, moved to a position near the doorway to the other room, and glanced inside. A darkened room. No one. No Mr. Chatham. *It's the echo of his voice. Permeating the house like old smells.* Rachael realized suddenly that Edith Chatham had been a widow before her parents had moved to Florida.

"Rachael, dear? Is something wrong?"

Rachael shook her head as if to clear it. Blankly she smiled at the elder woman who was smiling so worriedly at *her.*

"You did have quite a shock this morning, didn't you? Poor girl, you still look pale. Would you stay for dinner? I —"

Rachael said quickly, "Mrs. Chatham, thank you, but I — I have another engagement. In Philadelphia." Was this true? It all seemed so long ago.

On her way out of the house, Rachael asked Mrs. Chatham what she'd been longing to ask from the first: had Mrs. Chatham seen a boy on the road that morning? a husky boy of about ten, riding a new, shiny bicycle, at about the time she'd seen Rachael and called an ambulance? But Mrs. Chatham shook her head adamantly. Her soft jowls quivered with a look of protest. "No. There are no children on Pine Ridge Road any longer. I saw only *you.*" This odd blunt statement was made in a tremulous voice. Rachael said, "But there are new houses up the road, there must be young children in those families?" but Mrs. Chatham repeated, "There are none. You've all grown up and moved away forever. That was your wish, wasn't it? All of you."

Abruptly the visit was over. Rachael would have squeezed Mrs. Chatham's hand in parting, but the older woman drew back, shutting the door.

Moved away forever? But not me!

Next, Rachael made inquiries along Pine Ridge Road. She would get to the bottom of this mystery! She drove and stopped at each house in turn, even those that were darkened and clearly empty, hoping to be told yes

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there was a boy, the boy lives here, the boy's name is ___, and here he is. (And the husky boy with the insolent blue eyes would run into the room guiltily smiling....) But she had no luck. How tired she was growing! Pulses beat in both her eyes. She was still rather shaken by her visit with Mrs. Chatham (and Mr. Chatham). Pine Ridge was not a neighborhood in which strangers rang doorbells, even with the excuse of being neighbors. You were allowed to know by looks of surprise and disapproval that you were not welcome. "Excuse me? I live at 88 Pine Ridge. This morning I saw a boy on a bicycle on the road, a boy of about ten.... There was a broken electric wire on the road.... Do you have a son? Do you know if your neighbors have a son that age? I...don't know the boy's name. He was alone." Rachael spoke with a number of residents, but no one was able to help her. One or two of these seemed to think that Rachael was looking for her own lost child, and were quick to assure her they hadn't seen him. At one of the newer, sleekly modern houses, a bearded stranger of vigorous middle age answered the door, and stared at Rachael as she stammered her request, and shouted for his son Adrian who was tall and lanky, about thirteen, a sullen boy with protuberant eyes, blemished skin and an insolent snake-tongue. The bearded father said angrily, "This him? He's been causing trouble, has he?" Rachael said quickly no, no trouble; and this wasn't the boy she was looking for. "You're sure?" the father said doubtfully. Rachael saw in the air between father and son a nimbus of shadowy, agitated waves; she flinched at the sight, of which the man and the boy were oblivious, staring at each other with grins of loathing. Rachael backed off, apologizing for having disturbed them. *What will happen between them, someday!*

But Rachael would long be departed. Rachael would not be a witness.

She gave up searching for the boy. The boy on the bicycle, the boy she had hoped to rescue. The boy who had disappeared. Very possibly, there was no boy. She would not think of him again. She'd ceased thinking of L__. Driving south to Philadelphia and arriving late at her darkened brownstone house, which she owned, on a residential street lined with acacia trees that had not been much damaged, so far as Rachael could see, by the storm. Washed her face, and the skin throbbed as if sunburnt. Tenderly bathed her eyes in cold water and examined them in the frank

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light of her bathroom: the pupils of both eyes were dilated, but equally; one was not conspicuously larger than the other.

Am I still alive?

I am!

II.

WEEK LATER Rachael discovered a print-out in her handbag. WARNING SYMPTOMS FOLLOWING TRAUMA. Quickly she threw it away without glancing at it. She'd had no symptoms.

The shock, the "trauma" — it had all been exaggerated.

She had no physical symptoms she was certain. Though there was a strangeness that frequently enveloped her, since the accident. An air of things being *not-real.* Even as beneath the surface of her daily life there seemed to be another life she was living intensely, secretly.

Dreaming while awake? I am not!

There was the episode with Morris B__.

Professor B__ had never been a lover of Rachael's though there were those who believed they'd had a love affair of long standing. A distinguished art historian whose field was Roman antiquities, a widower; and Rachael De Long, a brilliant younger woman who'd gone through a painful divorce in her late twenties. Rachael and B__ had been friends for years yet Rachael hadn't told him of her accident, and would not tell him. She didn't want to reveal such weakness to a man she so admired.... But meeting him for dinner one evening in late April, about twelve days after the accident, Rachael felt that cloud of strangeness envelope her; she stared at B__ whose skin appeared finely cracked like the glaze of ancient pottery, and a starburst of a lurid red birthmark was newly visible through his thinning hair. Rachael stood speechless, staring. B__ took her limp hand and kissed it, playfully, for such Old World-gentlemanly gestures were the professor's style, even as Rachael suppressed a shudder at the touch of his lips. So cold! Yet B__'s eyes were animated and soulful as always, beautiful eyes, the eyes of one who would have loved Rachael if circumstances had been different. He seemed to be pleading to her out of his mortal flesh. *Now you see what I am. What I must become.*

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Rachael pressed her fingertips to her eyes. No, she didn't want to see!

B__ asked Rachael what was wrong, and Rachael said quickly that nothing was wrong. She'd been working late.... She'd become a little obsessed with her translating....They sat in their usual booth in a romantic candlelit corner of the French restaurant and Rachael made an effort to be, to appear, normal; her normal self; clutching to a simulacrum of normalcy as one whose legs are stricken might clutch at surfaces to keep from falling. Rachael had given B__ her translation of Book VI of the *Aeneid*, Aeneas in the Underworld, and B__ spoke of it enthusiastically, but with some criticism; and Rachael tried not to stare at her friend's cracked and corroded skin which gave his face a look of tragic mask-like dignity, through which his eyes shone with a hope that wrenched her heart.

Does he know? His death-to-come.

His hands, too, and his wrists where they were exposed beyond the cuffs of his white cotton shirt, were finely cracked. The natural whorls and creases exaggerated as if seen through a microscope. Rachael lifted her eyes to B__'s forehead, to the amazing birthmark she'd never seen before. It was so conspicuous, not to speak of it might seem odd. "Your birthmark? I didn't realize you had one, Morris." B__ touched his forehead, puzzled. He smiled uncertainly. "I'm not aware of a birthmark." Rachael said quickly, "Oh, it's this candlelight! It's my eyes." As B__ stared after her, Rachael excused herself and left the table. In the women's rest room she anxiously examined her eyes. The right eye was slightly bloodshot, the eyelid puffy and bruised. She tried to see, but couldn't determine, whether the pupil was larger than the pupil of her left eye. *It isn't as if I am in a true Underworld. This is temporary.* She'd brought along in her handbag a pair of oversized sunglasses with lenses so dark as to appear opaque. Absurd to wear them in this restaurant, but she had no choice; when she returned to their booth, B__'s features were shadowy and blurred, the birthmark hardly more than disfiguring smudge, like something melting down into B__'s face. He rose as she approached, gentlemanly, concerned, asking again what was wrong, and Rachael said with an apologetic laugh, "I had my eyes examined today and the pupils are dilated. Order for me, please, Morris! Anything."

* * *

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Rachael it's been so long.

Rachael dear we just want to see you. To know you're well.

Her parents spoke urgently with her, on the phone. If Rachael didn't call them by eight o'clock Sunday evenings, they became anxious and called her.

"I'm fine! Really fine. Maybe in a few weeks...maybe in June...I can come visit."

Dreading a visit. To Coral Gables, shimmering in the sun.

Dreading what she might see. *My eyes. Not me. It's temporary.*

Rachael's father and mother rarely flew north any longer. Plane travel was too exhausting. Rachael flew to Florida to visit them at least twice a year and a visit was overdue and yet she could not bear to think of it, just yet. For she'd been having trouble recognizing people, lately.

Even at a family gathering in Baltimore, in May. What a hubbub of voices, laughter! Warmth and familiarity and embraces, kisses, a few tears, as Rachael stood stiff and smiling among them, desperate to hide the fact that most of these people were strangers to her. What was happening, what was wrong? Had she suffered some sort of brain damage? The world had become a test. Like a police lineup. You know some of these people are important to you, as you are important to them, but you haven't a clue which ones, or why.

An elderly woman with a pale, creased face and shiny blinking faded eyes and tremors in both hands. A mollusk pried from its protective shell. She clutched at Rachael's hand as if Rachael were a restless little girl eager to escape. The elderly woman's mouth moved, her thin lips were dampened with spittle in her effort to speak, but her words were muffled, as if a pillow were being pushed down over her face. *What is it, dear? Why have you gone so far from us? You know we love you best.* Rachael fumbled for her dark glasses, shoving them onto her face. Her eyes throbbed with their acute, sharpened vision. She heard herself laugh with the others, for a large family gathering (a wedding? but whose? not Rachael's, she was certain) is a happy occasion. *You will return to us, dear? Soon?* Rachael said *Oh yes! I promise.* Eager to escape! She removed the smoke-dark glasses and tossed them down in a defiant gesture but to her astonishment the room remained dark, the very air dark, so dark as to be nearly opaque.

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She felt good! Hiking in the woods! It had been six weeks now. She was fully recovered from whatever it was, that had happened to her, or had almost happened. Rarely did she think of it now. Never spoke of it. Nor had L__ returned to her life. This visit was the first to the house on Pine Ridge Road since the weekend of the storm. *Something drew me, I couldn't stay away.* Approaching her house in her car she'd seen several children on bicycles, of whom one resembled the boy who'd run over the electric wire, the boy whose life (Rachael liked to think, though probably this was sheer fantasy) she'd saved, but when Rachael drew closer she saw to her disappointment, unless it was relief, that this was an older child, with a tentative smile for a neighbor driving by in her car, not that crude, cruel face of her dreams. She noticed with surprise that the Chatham house was boarded up, a forlorn For Sale sign in the front lawn among tall spiky grass and dandelions, abandoned for years you'd think, unsaleable. Yet she'd been inside that house only a few weeks ago....

The old Tudor house, the De Long house, was unchanged. No time had passed, here.

Rachael was eager to get outdoors, and hike. *Couldn't stay away. No one knew I was there.* In the woods beyond the Pine Ridge cul-de-sac where as a girl she'd hiked alone when the area was sparsely settled. It was May, yet damply cold. Dogwood bloomed tentatively in the woods, skeletal little trees dwarfed by larger, coarser trees. The sky was overcast, the hue of tarnished pewter. Rachael had no need for her ugly dark glasses today. Her eyesight was stronger, she'd been sleeping better lately. Tramping through tall sinewy grasses and thistles, making her way gradually downhill. After a while Rachael realized she was following the broad tire tracks of trucks, at first in grass, then in mud. She realized there was something wrong with the woods: silence. (No birds?) Her sensitive eyes began to sting before she smelled the acrid, gritty smoke. But how could there be smoke in these woods? The county incinerator at the foot of the hill had been shut down a decade ago. Rachael knew she should turn back, and hike in another direction, but something compelled her forward like an opened hand nudging at her back. *Go on! See what there is to be seen.* She saw a brackish stream laced with froth that looked, from a short distance, alive. She felt the earth quaver beneath her feet: a dump truck thundered along another, parallel road. Smoke rose in vaporous tendrils

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above the treetops, vanishing into the low gray sky. Her eyes stung from the gritty, poisonous smoke. She coughed, but did not turn back. She heard heavy machinery and men's voices. Yes, this must be the incinerator, a low sprawling building of badly stained dark brick, with several blackened smokestacks out of which the powdery-gray smoke lifted. There was a whirring and grinding and vibrating of heavy machinery. Dump trucks entered a clearing in the woods bounded by a six-foot, badly rusted chain-link fence. Rachael's eyes were throbbing now with pain but she persisted in watching. She saw trucks backing up against the building to dump their mysterious contents onto conveyor belts that carried them into the interior of the building, into the roaring furnaces. Rachael could hear excited voices, she could hear muffled cries and screams. *Some of these are not quite dead yet. Why does it matter*? In the woods beyond the cul-de-sac, in the incinerator beneath the tarnished-pewter sky, such technicalities did not matter. Rachael caught glimpses of men in shiny hard hats and fire-resistant coats. Workingmen they must be, union men, performing their jobs, day shift, night shift, overseeing the dump trucks and their cargo, making certain nothing, no one, escaped. Rachael could almost see the massive rippling fires in the furnaces, dense as lava. She marveled at the height of the chimneys, the tops of which seemed to penetrate the cloud layer. There were soundless explosions of smoke, a vibrating of the earth beneath her feet. *Beauty in all things. This, you must see.* She would try. But she wasn't so strong as she'd believed she was. We never are. In the tattered grass a few feet from Rachael, blown against the fence, was a strip of something red, faded red, a woman's scarf or shawl. Rachael was breathing shallowly, through her mouth. Her fingers thrust through the chainlink fence as if she were hypnotized. A stocky swarthy-skinned man, presumably a foreman, in a shiny hard hat, noticed Rachael watching, and beckoned to her with a sly smile, but how could she have obeyed him even if she'd wished to, the six-foot chain-link fence in her way?

> HADES — HELL — is but the poetic term mankind has given to the life that rushes beneath our waking consciousness. A sewer of dark rushing water hidden by pavement. You can hear it rushing, you can smell it. You can feel its

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pulsations! Its power! Never can you see it. In the sewer of rushing water there is no GOOD — no EVIL; no PURE — no IMPURE; no HUMAN — no INHUMAN.

All is energy. Dark rushing water. Rushing to the sea.

She'd begun to keep a notebook beside her bed. These nights of fiery dreams. Waking drenched in sweat, and shivering with excitement, pulling off her damp nightgown to fling it onto the floor. No need to switch on a lamp. She could see in the dark! Her mind raced, she'd doubt she had been sleeping at all. A pen in her hand, rapidly writing, such wisdom the night revealed to her, and in the morning she would read what she'd written with no memory of having written it.

"Auntie Ra-chael!"

There came Rachael's godchild Cecie, the four-year-old daughter of Philadelphia friends, running into the room and into Rachael's arms. An urgent wet kiss on the cheek. Rachael laughed with pleasure and a little embarrassment, she who was a godmother incapable of believing in God, and no one's mother. Cecie's mother Thea was one of Rachael's oldest friends, a writer, translator, professor of comparative literature in whose presence, this evening, Rachael was feeling awkward. She'd avoided Thea for weeks. Had not even returned Thea's concerned calls. *Rachael what's wrong*? — that air of surprise and reproach in a friend's voice because apparently you are not friends, you are not intimate, you have your secret life unshared with us. "What did you bring me, Auntie Rachael?" the little girl giggled naughtily, fingers in her mouth, as predictably Thea said, "Cecie! That isn't polite." Rachael had brought her godchild a quite expensive set of pastel crayons and a large drawing pad with stiff white paper, it was Rachael's custom to bring Cecie a present when she visited, however frequently, or infrequently, she visited, and of course the child had grown to expect it, but what could you do? As Rachael told Thea it's too late to change, and I love it. But today, Cecie was strangely excited and bossy. Thea wanted to speak with Rachael, for she'd heard (what had she heard? from whom?) that Rachael hadn't been entirely well, Rachael had been taken by ambulance to a hospital, but Cecie continually interrupted

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the women, clapping her hands, rushing about, taller than Rachael remembered, and with a shriller voice; she ordered Auntie Rachael and Mommy to sit elsewhere in the living room, to "say your name SLOWLY and SPELL IT" — under the influence, Thea explained, embarrassed, of a new teacher in her pre-school class. Rachael laughed, happy to oblige. She didn't want to be interrogated by Thea who gazed at her with searching eyes, probing, prodding, Thea who was the kind of woman Rachael might have been had she had her baby and remained married, a woman with both a functioning mind and a functioning body.

Cecie was a beautiful child, large limpid dark eyes, chestnut-red hair in wavy strands, Rachael had first seen her as an infant two days old and had been shaken by the astonishing fact of her, her friends' baby, inwardly marveling *No words! No adequate words!* and Rachael had burst into tears, so Thea — and Thea's husband, who'd been present — had reason to believe that Rachael De Long was their close, dear friend, their friend for life, for didn't Rachael love Cecie almost as much as her Mommy and Daddy loved her? Each time Thea tried to turn the conversation onto a serious subject, Rachael fussed and laughed over Cecie who was intent upon showing off, hovering about the adult women like a hummingbird, both shy and aggressive, fingers jammed into her mouth. She remarked, "Aun-tie Ra-chael help me *draw*." So Thea was excluded, and Rachael went with Cecie into Cecie's room and the two sat at Cecie's little table, Cecie eagerly drawing with the new pastel crayons, chattering rapidly, and Rachael praised her skill at drawing (were these gorgeously colored zigzag figures animals? monsters? deformed human beings?), the four-year-old's display of energy, though knowing from past experience that Cecie would soon become bored and restless; for hadn't Rachael had this experience already, with other presents she'd brought Cecie, educational games, and toys, and dolls, and books? A powerful sense of déjà vu swept over her as if the little girl were herself, or Rachael was herself Cecie, and had lived through this interlude, and would live through it again, and again. *For never is there release. There is no one to grant us release.* Suddenly Rachael saw that Cecie's throat was scarred. In a panic; she tugged at the collar of the child's pullover. "Oh, Cecie, what is this? What happened to you?" It was a necklace of serrated scars, shiny like scales, were these burn scars? Rachael was sick with horror, lifting the child's

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pullover to see yet more scars on the child's thin chest. Or were these skin grafts? Rachael was moaning "Cecie, oh Cecie, my God" even as the little girl whimpered and squirmed away from her, and her mother hurried into the room to intervene. Rachael shouted, "Thea, what is this? These scars, burns — " Rachael tried to show Thea the scars but Thea too was pushing at Rachael's hands; Rachael had made a terrible mistake; never would they forgive her; Cecie was whimpering, and had begun to cry. "Auntie Rachael is scaring me, Mommy!" Cecie said, hugging her mother. "I don't like her no more." Rachael who was quite upset tried to explain what she'd seen, or believed she'd seen, but Thea said forcibly, in her maternal-authoritative way Rachael had frequently envied, "Rachael, there are no scars on Cecie; there are no scars anywhere on Cecie, and you know it. Rachael, I'll have to ask you to leave." Without another word, for she saw it was hopeless, Rachael rose, and left the room; and Thea, holding Cecie in her arms, followed her, though not closely; the adult women were flush-faced, and the little girl was crying loudly, brattishly. At the door, Rachael stammered an apology as one might apologize for another person in one's charge, a person of diminished responsibility whose very existence is a matter of deep embarrassment.

Thea interrupted Rachael to tell her they'd discuss this another time, but she must go now, still Rachael hesitated trembling and white-faced and one of her eyes splotched with blood (so Thea would report in horror afterward) on the verge even then of saying *Yet it might be avoided. A fire, an accident....*

"Rachael, goodnight!"

The door was shut in her face.

Driving then quickly, blindly home. Desperate to hide herself, her shame. Lick her wounds. She'd lost Cecie! She'd lost Thea. Thinking of the poisoned crown and robes sent by the vengeful Medea to the beautiful young Greek princess who was Medea's rival for Jason's love. How the crown burst into flames on the doomed princess's head, how the robes clung to her flesh, burning, as the girl ran in agony, screaming as she died. It was a hideous spectacle. Though only recounted in Euripides, for violence was forbidden on the Greek stage, Rachael had many times seen the poisoned crown, the poisoned robes, the terrified shrieking princess, she'd all but smelled the cooking flesh.... She shook her head, to

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clear it. She must get control of herself. *No one would do such a thing to a child. Of course, it would be an accident. With skin grafts, Cecie will survive.*

SEEING WITH HORROR that her right eye was splotched with blood. She'd had a hemorrhage! The eye was gouged-looking, like a bloody socket. And her face of which she'd been innocently vain, an attractive, still youthful if rather long and angular face, a face her first lover had called beautiful and noble, now looked like a rag that's been wrung. *No wonder they were disgusted by me. I am accursed.*

It was very late. She was sick with fatigue. Two o'clock in the morning. Often she fell on top of her bed, not wanting to open the bed, removing no clothes, only her shoes. Like messages from the dead her translations were scattered about the house, even on the carpet. There came a knock at the door downstairs. *No! Don't open it.* Yet there was Rachael staggering like a drunken woman to the door, and she did open it. "Rachael. My darling." Before Rachael could send L__ away, he stepped inside and shut the door.

I've come to take you back with me, Rachael.

Back where?

To the West. Where I live now.

I live here, my life is here! I'm happy here.

No. That's an illusion.

My life is my own! My life is not an illusion.

When the illusion dissolves, when you wake from your dream, then your life will be real. I've come to bring you home with me.

But you already have a wife don't you? You have wives. And children, don't you have children, too?

There came a long pause. In the dark, she understood that L__ was smiling.

Yes darling Rachael! But I don't have you.

In the morning, when at last she woke from her drugged, exhausted sleep, L__ was gone. No sign of L __, or of any man, or lover.

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Her body too which had become tight and virginal with the years, reverted to that body by day.

I can live like this for a long time. I have that strength.

The hemorrhaged eye was slow to heal. Rachael wore her dark glasses everywhere. A doctor told her she must have strained her eye working too much, or she was under strain — "But it will heal." "My life? My life will heal?" Rachael asked lightly. The doctor seemed not to hear. He wrote her a prescription for eye wash and instructed her to use it when she woke in the morning, and before she went to bed at night.

The doctor's face: a clotted cobweb through which kindly eyes regarded her with sympathy. The man's breath was of the earth, but an arid, stony earth. Rachael was capable of not flinching at his touch when he examined her eyes for she'd learned to chide herself *These are my illusions, and not real. Passing shadows.*

Thea called, left a message. "Rachael? Please call me. I'm worried about..." but the tape was smudged.

Rachael erased the message. As if it had never been.

The boy on the bicycle! Rachael looked for him everywhere, and found him nowhere.

Even on Philadelphia streets she looked for him.

For she knew. She knew!

She'd never told L__ about the boy on the bicycle. The boy was her secret.

Except. Had he been a boy, or had that been a dog's face, and in her fright she'd been confused? One day staring at a fierce-eyed dog that barked, barked, barked at her, in a Philadelphia suburb; a mixture of bulldog and terrier, thick coarse sand-colored fur, a squat muscled body, prominent chest and jaws and alert upright ears. Saliva slathered on the dog's purplish lips. Bright glassy eyes fixed upon Rachael as if he knew her, barking her name, barking her fate, hackles raised and stump of a tail erect like a grotesque sexual organ. *Cerberus guarding the portals of hell. As if I would wish to enter!* In fact, it was a cemetery Rachael was leaving.

* * *

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Morris B__ had died, unexpectedly. A cerebral hemorrhage.

Rachael had seen (had she? in a dream?) the explosion of blood in her friend's head, bursting through the scalp, the skin, seeping down his face. She'd seen, but had been unable to prevent. L__ assured her *There was nothing you could do, darling. There never is.*

His jackal-ardor. The rank smell of him. Underarms, crotch.

Yet it was strange: Rachael never saw L__ clearly. Only by lamp light. In shadow. His lean feral face and hungry eyes. His low wheedling seductive voice she heard like a voice inside her skull, echoing. Never had she invited her husband (no, L__ was her ex-husband) into her house, or into her bed, but she woke in the night to find him beside her, gripping her tight, naked and ravenous, as Rachael was naked and ravenous, bereft of all pride. *Like Siamese twins, grotesquely joined at the torso and pelvis.*

How different L__ was, as a lover, than he'd been in the long-ago days of their early marriage. Almost, Rachael believed L__ was not the same man.

He is the face of my weakness? Death enters us where we are least defended.

L__ had come for Rachael, to bring her with him to — wherever it was. California? The Sierra Nevada Mountains? *You know you love me. Rachael, it's only a matter of time.*

Rachael laughed, though she was frightened.

Rachael laughed saying *But everything is a matter of time!*

Rain ran like sooty smudged tears down the window panes of her bedroom.

Rachael it's been so long.

Rachael dear we just want to see you. To know you're well.

She could forestall a visit no longer. She flew to Miami in early June and rented a car to drive to Coral Gables and in the car she circled the sun-dazzled little peninsula of condominiums; acre after acre of condominiums; like Egyptian pyramids they were; tombs of the dead; and everywhere were tropical flowers, vivid glaring colors like neon pulsing in her eyes. Long Rachael had been the attentive daughter. Long the loving daughter. The dutiful daughter. Since their retirement and move to Florida and

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increasing health problems, Rachael had been helping to pay her parents' expenses, which were considerable; and Rachael had taken over taxes and maintenance costs for the beautiful old Tudor house on Pine Ridge Road; for how could she surrender the past? She took on extra work, including night classes and editorial projects, to increase her income, for after all she was young, still.

She had reserves of energy like a car with a gas gauge that while reading *empty* isn't, quite.

L__ said, "Go now. See your parents. A final time."

Rachael said, angrily, "'A final time'? What do you mean? Leave me alone."

In the night, L__ had (accidentally?) struck Rachael with the flat of his hand. In their sweaty Siamese-twin lovemaking. In the morning, Rachael saw a glimmer of blood in her right eye; on the plane, she'd felt the eye ache and throb; she fumbled to put on her dark glasses, guessing the eye had hemorrhaged again. Yet her vision was so acute, penetrating. *I see what's there. What is to come.* For that reason she'd made an effort to appear utterly normal. She'd had her untidy hair cut and smoothly styled and she had purchased for this trip to Coral Gables a white linen suit and a white silk shirt and around her neck she'd knotted a gift from L__: a red silk scarf he'd left for her, draped over her naked torso like a shroud.

She wanted her parents to glance up at her, an attractive young woman of thirty-four, with a smile, before even they recognized her as their daughter.

Yet parking her rental car at the "assisted-living" residence, approaching the glass-and-stucco building in which her parents now lived, a sun-glaring hive, Rachael began to feel dread for her mission. Rehearsed her stammering words. *Mother? Father? I love you.*

Mother! Father! It's Rachael, who loves you.

Her throat seemed to close. She must have swallowed a burr, a thistle.

On previous visits Rachael had found her parents outside, at poolside. In an interior courtyard of palm trees, roses and bougainvillea. Such fragrant vegetation disguised the medicinal odors, the odors of decay. Mr. and Mrs. De Long would be with their fellow senior citizens on this balmy day. In that communal trance following lunch. Hazy no-time following

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any meal. For meals were the one pleasurable event now. Rachael was eager to see her parents yet her feet were heavy as horse's hooves. Dragging.

What they will see in my face. What I will see in their faces.

She entered the courtyard....The pool! A lavish miniature sea. Its sparkling aqua water like shaken Jell-O. No one was swimming. Rachael stared through her darkened lenses at the elderly men and women strewn about the terrace like turtles in the sun: where were her parents? Which of the men was her father, and which of the women, her mother? (There was a notable predominance of women. Widows.) Rachael felt a stab of panic. This was like the wedding in Baltimore; this was worse than the wedding in Baltimore; so many elderly men and women, and any two of them might be her parents.... She stood at the edge of the terrace, hoping not to be seen. For the blankness in her face would betray her.

In Hades, the clamorous wraiths behaved as if brain-damaged, blind. To come alive even briefly they had to sip sacrificial blood. They were but hallucinations. Yet not lacking in identity, in significance. While these wraiths, strewn before her in sunglasses and straw hats and colorful summer clothing, like aged children, seemed indistinguishable from one another. *Like any grouping of bodies after decay has set in.*

Rachael then remembered: since his prostate cancer operation the year before, her father was attended by a practical nurse named Iris, a jovial black woman whose salary Rachael herself paid, and with whom she frequently spoke on the phone. Where was Iris? There were several black women in nurse's uniforms with elderly charges, male and female, and Rachael couldn't tell them apart, either. She saw a woman wearing a straw hat with a Laura Ashley band, which Rachael believed she'd given her mother; but when Rachael grew cautiously near, the elderly woman turned a blank, smiling-imbecile face toward Rachael, and Rachael shrank back in horror. "Excuse me. I'm...."

A number of the elderly were squinting at Rachael, some of them smiling hopefully. *Are you my daughter? Have you come to see me?* Overhead flew a flock of raucous gulls. Rachael saw these elderly bodies as they would appear to any predator. What meager meat, once the beaks begin their stabbing, slashing, tearing...

There: a pot-bellied little man with a querulous wizened face and

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collapsed chest, who looked familiar; he lay on a chaise longue by the glimmering pool, unmoving, and beside him sat, fanning herself with a copy of *People*, a busty black woman who resembled Iris. Was this Samuel De Long? But how diminutive and frail he'd grown! A few feet away sat a white-haired woman with an attractive, ruined face; this woman, fussing with needlepoint, resembled Rachael's mother to a degree, except Elinor De Long had always been fairly slender, and this poor woman looked as if her shapeless body had been poured into a child's pink play suit, like pudding.

Rachael drew breath to call out, but could not.

A black girl pushing her charge in a wheel chair noticed Rachael, who stood as if paralyzed, and said, in a friendly, concerned voice, "Ma'am? You lookin for somebody here?" but Rachael didn't seem to hear. Rachael was transfixed by the vision of stabbing beaks. The rapacious pitiless beaks. No more would the predators' beaks distinguish between these bodies than Rachael herself could. And why did it matter, really? Flesh splattered with blood, the brittle atrophied bones picked clean within minutes. The gulls would gorge themselves in a frenzy yet by the next dawn they would be ravenous again, for such is the destiny of gulls. Predator, and prey. For a time you are predator, and then you are prey.

"Ma'am? Who you lookin for? I can maybe help you."

Rachael was so moved by the girl's kindness, she began to cry even as she turned away clumsily. Saying she'd made a mistake, she had the wrong address.

She found herself parking her car, hiking along the weedy cinder drive to the county incinerator. There was a tall, badly rusted wire mesh fence and a padlocked gate with a yellow warning sign

COUNTY PROPERTY NO TRESPASSING

Rachael stood at the gate, staring inside. The aged building, of weatherworn and graffiti-disfigured dark red brick, was clearly abandoned. Even the graffiti looked old, like ancient hieroglyphics, indecipherable. Tall, blackened chimneys appeared to be cracked in numerous places; moss grew on their sides; no smoke, surely, had erupted from them

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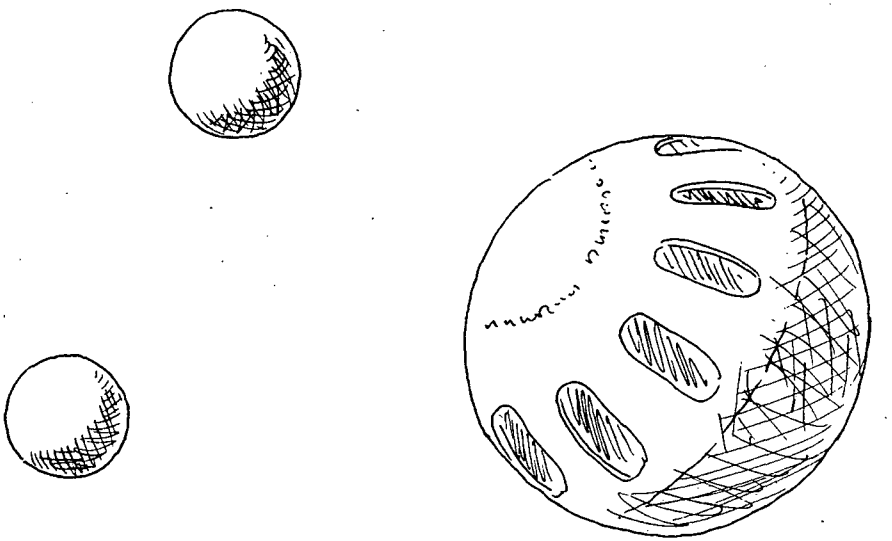
in years. Or so you would believe. Rachael thrust her fingers through the mesh gate, and strained to hear the roaring of the furnaces. Her sensitive nostrils could just detect a subtle, acrid-sweetish odor as of cooking flesh.

Night. L__ awaited her in the house. She ran out into the pelting rain and her clothing was soaked at once. Her hair streaming in her face. Above the treetops the sky was split with veinlike flashes of lightning but the lightning must have been miles away for thunder came belatedly, a low desultory muttering. Rachael lifted her face. *No more! May my vision be taken from me.* Again there was lightning, far away. Where?



Shanahan

PING AND PONG (THE MOONS OF WHIFFLE)

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A SCIENTIST'S NOTEBOOK

GREGORY BENFORD

SUNSHINE TECHNOPOLIS

SCIENCE IS necessarily abstract, and technology must be concrete.

Indeed, concrete is a technology, invented by the ancients — and because it is old, we never think of it as miraculous. Yet it is not obvious how sand, lime, clay and water blend to make a hard, rugged stone, its chemistry still a subject of study.

How technology goes from a miracle to the commonplace is another theme of science fiction, nowhere more concentrated than in the visual media, which feed upon the new, the gaudy, the gee whiz.

So there I was in fabled Hollywood, having lunch at the Fox Studios. The food was good and I was with a movie producer who was interested in a story idea I had pitched. We had gone over the whole plot structure, the breakdown into three acts (a Hollywood commandment), character and logic and setting and the works.

Everything seemed set. Everybody agreed. The female lead character seemed particularly right, a match of motivation and plot.

Then the producer, a woman in her thirties, leaned across the lunch table and said, "She's just right, now. Only...how about, halfway through, she turns out to be a robot?"

I looked around the room, at the murals depicting famous scenes from old movies, at stars dining on their slimming salads in all their Armani finery, at the sweeping view of little purple dots that danced before my eyes. "Robot?"

"Just to keep them guessing," the producer added helpfully.

"But that makes no sense in this movie."

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"It's science fiction, though — "

"So it doesn't have to make sense," I finished for her.

So there I was a few weeks later, talking to a story editor for a development company interested in making a TV miniseries from a novel of mine, *The Martian Race.* The whole point of the approach was to portray Mars the way it would really be, hard and gritty and unforgiving. The story editor liked this a "whole lot" and thought it was a "breakthrough concept" and all, but he had his own creative input, too.

"I want a magic moment right here, at the end of the first hour," he said.

"Magic?" I asked guardedly.

"Something to bring out the wonder of Mars, yeah."

"Like...."

"See, when the astronaut is inside this cave — "

"Thermal vent. From an old volcano — "

"Okay, okay, vent it is. In this vent, he's trapped, right?"

"Well, not actually — "

"So he's banged up and he thinks he's going to die and he thinks, what the hell."

"What the hell."

"Right, you get it. He says what the hell, he might as well take his helmet off."

"Helmet. Off."

"Right, you got it. Big moment. Cracks the seal. And he smiles and takes a big breath, and says, 'Oxygen! There's oxygen here.' Whaddaya think?"

"I liked the robot better."

Standing outside, I reflected on how little the truths of the world, or respect for simple reality, impinged on Hollywood. They yearned for the miraculous tech, never mind scientific coherence.

Yet I also saw around me the biggest, most complex technical social machine on the planet — a can-do paradise. How come, this contrast?

Noting how easy it is to build aircraft outdoors and fly them in clear skies, businessman E.J. Clapp wrote: "There is going to be a Detroit of the aircraft industry. Why not here in Los Angeles?"

That was in 1926. Soon airplane manufacturing businesses sprouted alongside the citrus groves, then blossomed into a full-fledged aerospace industry. Other technology-driven industries cropped up, followed by facilities for the sort of scientific research that makes

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engineering creativity thrive. Now science and technology are far more deeply rooted in this semi-arid landscape than the few remaining orange trees.

Why Southern California, though?

The weather promises sunny beaches, mild breezes and a laid-back life, not the chilly intellectual air of an MIT or Harvard. But weather is not just a comfort — it shapes. First, the air is clear for jet testing and star gazing. Mt. Wilson and then Mt. Palomar drew the Andrew Carnegie Foundation to build the biggest optical telescopes because they offered the best astronomical "seeing" conditions in North America.

Clarity and dependable sunlight led to Hollywood's dominance over New York film makers. Being able to train troops out of doors drew Marines to Camp Pendelton and the Army Air Force to Edwards and other air bases.

For another thing, even eggheads ain't stupid. Many a rocket scientist presumably landed here simply because she saw the same bikini-in-January advantages that snowbound cheeseheads notice on sunny rosebowl Sundays.

Yet weather was less determining than determination itself. As Allen Scott suggests in his 1993 study of techno-growth, *Technopolis*, immigrants here had already crossed many horizons in the U.S., itself a nation willing to take chances. Unusually mobile and optimistic, they were willing to venture on conceptually, as well.

Key to this culture was a new idea: tools open us to fresh possibility faster than theories. Edmund Hubble peered through Mt. Wilson's clear air and discovered that the universe was expanding. Einstein came to Caltech to confer with Hubble, who had directly shown what Einstein had not ventured to propose: a universe growing larger, not static. A famous picture of the shaggy-haired genius lurching around Caltech on a bicycle caught the flavor: machinery sends us in new directions.

California has always been about movement, travel, speed. The eager boosterism of men like Clapp flowed into cross-cutting rip tides, as imported technical skills blended. Optical tricks could make better movies and bomb sights alike. Machinists at lathes could turn out better oil drills or tank barrels or airplane exhausts. Switching talent from one field to another enabled skilled workers to navigate the ebb and sway of industrial currents.

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The Southland's new industries did not resemble William Blake's 19th century Satanic mills. The long beach refineries' flame-spouting, blade-runner-style pipescape was rare — though oil played a major role in pumping wealth from and to the region. Our tumbleweed-strewn oil fields pioneered many new methods of extraction. Raymond Chandler got himself fired from his oil company executive job in the early 1930s, partly because he was a drunk and partly because he could not keep up with the pace of change in the industry. This lucky failure gave us Chandler's wise-cracking skepticism about the mean streets we were spreading over the obliging land. Yet those ample, sun-splashed streets proved crucial to innovation's rapid spread. SoCal offered not the old way but the freeway.

Mobility was a state of mind; Californians did not stay put when firms went bust. They could cruise the mile-equals-a-minute freeways to new frontiers, where towns became mere off-ramps. A mobile cadre of people used to living by their wits made innovation paradoxically routine.

Building our paradise, we shamelessly mirrored the best of the Other Coast. Stanford was like Harvard, Caltech (CIT) like MIT, Scripps Institute of Oceanography in La Jolla like Woods Hole in the Massachusetts Cape. If San Francisco was like Boston, though, LA was like nothing in the East. For a while it seemed more like brawling Chicago, its cultural currents making for tricky navigation. LA's Old Money scarcely dated back more than a few generations, and usually kept its cash in real estate. Newcomers brought a sense of open horizons.

Here, position was not everything. The race for insight and new products alike came from restless intellectual resources, not from highly fixed natural resources, the old form of wealth. Quick minds gathered in close clusters were the crucial elements, realized early by a state that built a new kind of bridging institution: UC, the greatest of public universities.

Few now realize how revolutionary UC's close concert of university abstraction and business practicality was in the early decades of this century. From the beginning, UC was a driver of the economy. At UC Davis the system enshrined viniculture as a legitimate intellectual pursuit, fostering the nation's leading wine industry. Oceanographers at UCSD invented

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the wet suit, only to have a UC committee recommend not bothering to patent it, because only scientists would use it.

Medical radiation therapy got its momentum from high energy physics at UC Berkeley, where Earnest Lawrence's cyclotron provided the particles. Orange grove yields grew using the lore discovered at an agricultural field station in Riverside, later the kernel of UCR.

Caltech, Stanford, USC and the UCs made engineering central; even in the Depression, out here there were jobs. Though the Other Coast had invented and first developed the airplane, their advantages yielded to our sheer energy. By the 1950s the aerospace-electronics complex bestrode the largest high-tech industrial region in the world, a rank it holds today. The Jet Propulsion Lab and Ramo Wooldridge provided the first U.S. space satellite, *Explorer*, in 1958. A year later, Rocketdyne's Redstone engine drove the first Project Mercury flights.

The Shuttle lifts off from Cape Canaveral, but it lands at Edwards Air Force Base. Meanwhile, the U.S.'s most active space port is Vandenberg, at SoCal's northern edge.

In aerospace and electronics especially, SoCal pioneered the new high-tech hierarchy: well-paid managers, scientists and engineers, underpinned by a vast stratum of laborers who assembled and built the molded plastics, aluminum cowlings, printed circuit boards and, lately, personal computers. Growth was cutthroat and unregulated among this understory. Price gouging and lurching job growth brought their Darwinnowings of the small capital firms that came and went like vagrant, failed species in evolution's grand opera.

Only slowly did a basic aspect of SoCal sink in: its great driver was no longer weather or agriculture. The pace was set by the restless Technopolis style SoCal has done more to invent than any other region on the planet. The complex gained great advantage from innovations developed locally, and thus applied most immediately here. After 1990, the decline of aerospace forced many engineers to find hot new jobs in Hollywood special effects teams. Heads-up pilot displays for real fighter planes led to great simulation games bought by twelve-year-olds.

We are making fresh industries out of age itself. The sunshine draws retirees, who want better medical

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care. Today, nestled around the old-style aerospace complexes are brightly growing new-techs like medical device manufacture and biotechnology. To drive this synergistic complex harder, UCI has ushered onto the campus itself research labs built by private companies, which will hand them over to UC ownership a few decades hence: a back-current, commerce feeding research.

So far SoCal has uniquely managed the handoff from one tired wonder-tech to the newest — unlike Massachusetts Route 128, the highway along which high-tech companies cluster as in Silicon Valley, which is declining in clout and profits. Route 128 ceded its comparative advantages in computer design and manufacturing both to the Stanford-inspired Silicon Valley and to burgeoning assembly complexes in the San Gabriel Valley and San Diego. California's secret seems to be its decentralized, experimental style, easy-going only in appearances. Technology workers learned to value collaboration and collective learning among a jostling, competitive crowd of hungry start-ups. Route 128 settled into its middle age with a complacent band of a few self-sufficient corporations who learned little from each other. They tried to innovate by pyramid management, rather than draw innovation up from the grunts laboring below. Think 1970s Detroit for a comparison.

Not that older industries will not recede as these advance. A Dickensian jungle of faltering assembly plants and techno-sweatshop sociology could grow in the sunshine.

Whither our Sunshine Technopolis? Some in SoCal see ahead an era of limits, if only because it cannot build 'burbs to the Arizona border. A disjointed mosaic of seven counties and 200 cities is failing the Technopolis at the most basic, seldom mentioned level: infrastructure. Traffic now compels decisions about location and office hours. Gridlock hobbles Digitalwidget Company's ability to say where and what hours its employees can work. Air pollution limits what shops can set up in the region, so that some painting and finishing gets shipped to who-cares Nevada.

Even the techno-triumph of our water system is straining to carry so much water to agriculture, which drinks 80% of the supply. And the public schools woefully fail many students, leaving corporations two costly choices: educating their own workforce or relocating to where

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kids' technical skills go beyond lighting smudgepots.

There are limited techno-solutions to such problems, and we will try them all. SoCal could easily become the world's premier electric car complex. Biotech can find drought-resistant genes to tailor our commercial crops. Tele-commuting of great power can keep more of us working at home. More computers might marginally help some schools.

Sound familiar? California's fastlane culture discovers social problems as the squashed bug on a conceptual windshield. Early warning for other places, but rough on the bug. Which way SoCal goes will suggest how the global Technopolis will evolve.

I suspect the SoCal Technopolis is about to realize that to remain healthy and prosperous it must invent a regional government and discover leaders as imaginative as the scientists and technologists who thrive here. Southern Californians see science and technology as integral to the big socio-economic picture.

Perhaps the Technopolis will learn that it must have a regional government of imagination comparable to its own. No more municipal workers hired to fill out ethnic quotas or just provide jobs, jobs, jobs. No more constant bickering over local traffic and managerial levels, no streets jack-hammered up again and again because utilities do not cooperate in scheduling.

Before long they may send politics-as-usual packing—on the next space shuttle or bullet train. Fantasy is fine, but reality eventually bites.

Still...there I stood, outside one of Hollywood's biggest studios. Soured, I was, on the mega-industry that cares little for reality and less for science fiction's speculative games played with future realities.

Yet I knew that other conceptual castles were burning on the internet plain. Story managers in LA, I learned first hand, have an ill-concealed contempt for the intellectual levels of the rest of the country. The most common reaction I heard, while pitching a story line that paid attention to the constraints of the possible, was "Nobody'll care about that. Don't waste time on scientific plausibility."

Not that I think any of us can alter that mind-set. If anything, New York is worse.

But are Los Angeles and New York central anymore?

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That question looms large over the mavens of publishing and TV, movies and magazines. Recently two major science fiction magazines went to Internet versions, paralleling their print editions of *Analog* and *Asimov's*; go to their Web sites, download their contents into your e-book — for a fee. Yet another trend.

And movies are in a digitizing dither. The Internet makes every dude with a computer master of his data-plex. Can LA and NY, once the castles of creativity, remain central amid the onslaught of innately decentering technologies?

Probably not. We now live in not an information economy, but an attention-starved one. Increasingly, information is like the air, free. NY and LA now compete for our attentions with Internet self-publishers and games programmers in Tucson.

A 2020 vision:

Let's say you're a writer — novels, scripts, Internet 'zines, it doesn't matter. One afternoon you take a break from the pixel screen world and venture to a mall.

"Mr. Nogales." An AdWall recognizes you as you come in from the parking lot. "Those shirts you liked last year are on sale at ShopAll. The new designs — "

"Nope, I'm headed for Compu-You."

"They've been replaced by the so much better Chips'n'Discs, only steps away!" the AdWall says cheerfully, turning into a map showing the location. When you get there, the store knows you're coming.

"Mr. Nogales!" A clerk smiles and fades, flickering ghostly transparent for a moment so you'll know it's a smart hologram. You can see the fringing fields, anyway. You ask to see the new rig that turns written text to a 3D visual. It's mated to a now-standard box that can take *The Big Sleep* and show you how Tom Hanks would have played Bogart. Not just a paste-on face, either — the Hanks software uses all his well-honed expressions.

"Look, I want to build my own," you say, a little irked.

"Oh, you want ScriptOut."

You try out the new device, which takes your script notes, some actors' still photos and reaction shots, and builds a rough cut of a film. "This one's a beauty," you say, noting that the trial actors have supple body movements, no jerky expressions, smooth voices mouthing your words. "I'll take it."

Eagerly you haul it home, where

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you'll make a movie in a month. Then you can pitch it electronically to H'wood, or better, one of the new studio-shops in Sydney, Australia. And your home is in Fairhope, Alabama.

Real estate prices in LA and NY long before pushed most creative people away, an economic force driving development of distancing tech. Left behind in their midget apartments will be the hacks who can only exist as studio/network parasites; people who can *only* sell in person.

California's Sunshine Technopolis will reward those who can work at a distance, staying away from the groupthink of studios.

This could emerge from a "smart" future, where art and entertainment are dispersed because the physical world is literally smarter. Everything from offices to clothes will be ever-aware of your presence, preferences, anxieties, even pulse rate.

Some see this future as an "ad-topia" where objects importune you at every turn. Others think it may be an "e-topia," milder and more subtle, once advertisers get the idea that consumers don't like being rudely approached.

In places this has already happened. Remember the talking ads in supermarkets that drove shoppers away? The talking cars that said "Stand back! You are too close"? Like those, bad human software tailoring will get ironed out by markets. To be effective, ads must be entertainment, tailor-made to the individual.

This comfy culture will give us endlessly solicitous environments, only too happy to entertain and divert. Commonplace machines will answer when spoken to, give assistance in their own operation, self-program to our repeated needs without being told to. They will be true "house servants" because houses — indeed, all the high-tech metropolis — will come to be servants.

Everywhere, objects and people will both work smarter, not harder.

Why should consumers expect anything less of their entertainment? It, too, will be self-customizing. And the people who create it will resist working in the conceptual boxes of LA and NY. They will have to, for smart-tech gives consumers more control, not less. And they will demand not studio sameness, but the richness that comes from small scales.

Increasingly, New York will filter, not create. The fastest way to de-center yourself in the digital future will be to imagine that you are

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central, essential. That's when you'll know you're actually OOI — Out Of It.

Networking means diffusion of talent and knowledge. And distributed processing equals distributed intelligence, as chips get cheaper. This means that thrifty software can replace elaborate hardware in presenting images, music, storylines. Such "software-saturated smart places" will be the hip analog of coffee houses, and their entertainment will come from diffused sources, not LA or NY.

Not that matters will stop there.

In this 2020 vision, media are also lodged in our bodies. "Inset" wearable computers offer movies that can run on the inner surface of your glasses. Or books.

Not that most people read that way. No, any educated person owns a book. Just one, though, maybe with leather binding, sheets that feel like high quality bond. But the text is in a single chip in the binding, the words projected into the pages in whatever type style you prefer.

Back at the mall you stopped by BookNook to pick up a few, downloaded in a finger-snap from an online inventory sitting in New Jersey. No more entombing text in the bodies of dead trees that then jam your bookshelves.

Back in the ancient year 2000, fresh from the TwenCen, the only major NY-style publisher to move to the Coast had been Harcourt, whose San Diego bastion heralded the diffusion of publishing. Now many houses are in unlikely spots like Portales, New Mexico, or even Tahiti. Most writers, too, live outside the grasping Megapolis, which is too pricey for anybody but CEOs anyway. Some like classical books, but most have moved over to interactive modes. Either way, they're free of New York publishing thinking, because there are just as many major publishers on the Internet as on 6th Ave.

LA has always pressed its nose against the window glass of literary NY, as far back as when its own Book Review missed Raymond Chandler's emergence. Publishing is in NY, so they must know, went the mantra. Now that's corrected, because there's no There to bow toward in a literary landscape with plenty of hills, but no mountains.

Neither city will imagine that it rules American literature; the rest of us know that they never did.

So now imagine the Big Event of 2020, the first manned Mars expedition. That's what I tried to do in a recent novel, *The Martian Race*,

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the project which had gotten me into that pitch session with a story editor. The essence of exploration in the 21st Century will be closeup scrutiny from the stay-at-homes.

Think of it: All humanity will go, riding on the shoulders of the actual crew through high-res digital TV, even 3D. The first Mars expedition will be a cliffhanger (sometimes literally) lasting 2.5 years.

While Mars will be the center of events, to manage this torrent of data, we'll need the devices of infotainment. Recall those TV series of the 1970s, when we followed the lives of real people for a year, sharing their flaws and joys.

So what angle do you want to follow? The crew's personality clashes? Check today's exciting events! The science? Here's a compact summary, tarted up as a little playlet of discovery. Want to invest in RedPlanet Inc. futures? — online buying is available. You choose.

Mars as mega-event will resist top-down management. In our arts and entertainments, so should we all.

But will this independence really help science fiction, or science generally, in the larger culture?

Only if we — that is, you — demand it.

Those producers and story editors think the larger public cares only for sensation, spectacle, fiery explosions and creepy monsters galore. Plot logic gets trampled along with physical reality.

But that was old Hollywood. The studio system just plain didn't get the technical accuracy and hard-edged grandeur of Kubrick and Clarke's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Their idea of a near-imitation was *Silent Running*, a maudlin, sentimental, forgettable epic which hinged upon nobody's realizing that a spacebourne greenhouse would get less sunlight if it cruised out to Saturn.

Southern California is a genuine sunshine Technopolis, one of the most dynamic regions in the world. Yet it has little respect for technical realities, or the people who hold that to be important.

As the Technopolis comes to realize its power, it will exert itself more — I hope!

Perhaps, with entertainment more flexible, we can get sf stories that pay attention to the world of science. At least a few of us will buy those. And just maybe they could catch on. They'll be more real, after all.

In an increasingly media-saturated world, glitz and glamour may give us a hunger for authenticity.

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The Technopolis will grow to a global culture, and just as science fiction began as the expression of a technical class which had no literary voice, so the Technopopulace will demand their own bards and ballads, but sung in just the key they want.

This dream of mine is pleasant, but still, it's just a dream. The SoCal Technopolis may be a harbinger of the world transformation to come, or an anomaly. Let's remember that the novelist who best captured an essential of Americans — that they are eternal dreamers — was F. Scott Fitzgerald. In *The Great Gatsby* he caught our innocent assumption that the future must be brighter, and the new would be good.

He ended up in Hollywood, writing unremarkable scripts and the unfinished *The Last Tycoon*, trying to catch the dream himself. A heart attack caught him instead.

So on the other hand, maybe I should've just nodded my head, saying, "Sure, yeah, make her a robot. When can you cut a check?"

Gregory Benford is the author of two novels set on UC campuses, *Timescape* (set at UCSD, where he got his doctorate), and *Cosm* (at UCI, where he is a professor of physics). Comments appreciated at gbenford@uci.edu.

COMING ATTRACTIONS

AFTER TOO MANY months' absence, Dale Bailey returns next month with a fine novelet about a young artist who unexpectedly inherits a house in West Virginia. It's probably not giving away too much to say that if you read Elizabeth Hand's review last month of Dale's first book, you'll have an inkling of what to expect in "Inheritance."

We'll also enjoy a visit to eighteenth-century London, courtesy of Amy Sterling Casil. In "Mad for the Mints," she regales us with the mad misfortunes of a confectioner by the name of Girard and his many strange visitors.

We also anticipate new work soon from Robert Sheckley, Stephen R. Boyett, Albert Cowdrey, Rick Wilber, Nancy Etchemendy, and unrelated Reeds Robert and Kit. Further down the road, we've also got a lot of first-rate stories coming this way, including stories by Kate Wilhelm, Lucius Shepard, Lewis Shiner, James Morrow, and Ray Bradbury. If you like good fiction, you won't want to miss an issue.

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Some writers actively seek out strange experiences in search of new material. Then there are writers who find that strangenesses seek them out. Gary Shockley seems to belong to that latter group. A former neighbor of ufologist Dr. Jacques Vallee, he has seen his share of weirdness. His last story for us, "Dr. Borg" (May 1999), recounted an unusual trip to the doctor's office. This new one darkly brings us a weird Halloween episode.

Gary Shockley lives in East Palo Alto with his wife, writer Lori Ann White. In a letter dated 1/12/2020, he reports that he is perhaps the only American who actually suffered a Y2K problem on his computer.

Skullcracker

By Gary W. Shockley

I PAUSE IN A SHADOWED doorway near Standley and Main. It's late, near midnight, in downtown Tomahawk. The trick-or-treaters are long gone, leaving a residue of bar-hoppers and delinquents. Shrieks and whoops pierce the drizzle, costumed people race wildly across rain-slicked streets. I step out and resume my stroll down the sidewalk, gazing at puddles, drinking in their fragmented images. Pieces of the great cosmic jigsaw puzzle, that's what they are, and every day I put more of it together.

A car rumbles by, leaking gang rap, and a large pumpkin flies out, smashing the wall beside me. I give them the finger while slipping on seeds. As I brush rind off my trenchcoat, I notice three people walking toward me: giggling vamps to either side, a soldier limping in the middle. The soldier says something; the vamps laugh hysterically and slap at his crutch.

They stop in front of me.

"Well!" says the taller vamp, brushing fire-red strands from lascivious eyes. "Care to donate some blood?"

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"It's for a good cause," says the shorter vamp, whose short-cropped hair is black.

I study the soldier. He is one sorry sight. Riddled with bullet holes, leaking blood. One eye hangs out, and his mouth is twisted nearly beyond speech. He leans on a crutch, his right leg wrapped in a bloody bandage. A rifle is slung over his right shoulder, while ammo belts crisscross his perforated chest. But what grabs my attention is the pumpkin he clutches under his arm. Completely wrapped in aluminum foil, it reflects streetlights, stoplights, headlights —

"He likes your friend, Tim," says Short Vamp with a flash of fangs. "Why don't you introduce him."

"Not again," sighs Tall Vamp.

Tim the soldier hefts the foil-wrapped pumpkin. "Know this guy?" he asks.

I give it a closer scrutiny. The wrap-job is masterful, the eye, nose and mouth openings neatly tucked with foil. The pumpkin seems to reflect all that is right in the world.

"Full Metal Jack-o'-lantern," I say.

"Hah!" Tall Vamp slaps Tim's arm. "He got it!"

Tim tucks the pumpkin back under his arm, glaring at me. "Smart guy. Who you supposed to be anyway?"

"He's that immortal guy," suggests Tall Vamp. "What's his name?"

"Highlander," Short Vamp says.

I shake my head, recalling what they used to call me. And I say it, the barest whisper, testing it on my tongue after these many years.

"What'd he say?" says Tall Vamp.

"Skullcracker," repeats Short Vamp, chewing gum. She plants her hands on skewed hips and blows a bubble until it pops. "Gee, I think I missed that movie."

There was never a movie. But already they are losing interest, starting past.

"Work on the costume, Weedwhacker," says Tim, slapping my shoulder so hard that my pocket clinks loudly. He stops, comes back, gives my trenchcoat a closer look. "What the hell was that?"

I draw away. "Nothing. It's nothing."

"Nothing? Didn't sound like nothing. What you got in there?"

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I don't like being questioned. I don't like it. I don't like it. I don't like it.

"He's packing," Short Vamp whispers nervously.

"Hooooookayyyyyy," says Tall Vamp. "Tim, let's get out of here."

"You're one fucking creep, Weedwhacker!" Tim shouts, letting the vamps drag him away.

Slipping back into shadow, I feel better. Packing? Did they think I had a shotgun, or maybe an assault rifle? People are so paranoid these days. I watch them cross the street and enter a bar. Then I reach in my pocket and jostle the spikes.

Only four left. I should have hit a hardware store yesterday. I pull one out, hold it up to the light. Eight inches of gleaming metal. I polish them myself, grind them to a razor tip. Turning it this way and that, I peer into its reflected light, thinking about the trio.

They seemed normal enough. Of course, they always do. That's the thing. You never know. You just never know.

The mind is a fragile thing. Most people don't realize it. They think they're fine, they'll always be fine. Their lives are good, nothing could possibly go wrong. Then comes the layoff, failed marriage, death of a loved one — It doesn't take much. Not much at all. You'd be surprised. One minute you're fine. The next, you've snapped. The mind is like that. It can snap. Just like that.

Shouting wakens me. I don't like dozing off, but it happens. It happens a lot. I sit up, wipe drool from my chin, sparkles from my eyes. Tim and Tall Vamp are outside the bar. "Fucking tramp!" he shouts at her. "Asshole!" she counters. Short Vamp emerges carrying the foil-wrapped jack-o'-lantern, which she shoves into Tim's arms. "Just go home, Tim. You're drunk." Tim calls her a tramp, too. "Sleep it off," she says, trying to drag Tall Vamp back inside. At last, after a final furious exchange, she succeeds.

I duck deeper into shadow as Tim stumbles across the street. He curses and throws his crutch at a car that dares honk at him. As he lurches past with the jack-o'-lantern tucked under his arm, he chants, "Fucking bitch."

I follow at a distance.

He stumbles into an alley. Grabbing up a board, he bangs it against

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garbage cans in passing, still cursing his girlfriend. I slip from shadow to shadow, closing in.

The memories come flooding back at times like this. Antwerp Asylum. Not a happy place. It's been twenty years, but you never forget. Not something like that. Lobotomies were the rage back then. Amazing what cross-cutting the frontal lobe will do for you. Suddenly you're well-behaved as a philodendron. I saw it happen, lots of times. Almost got one myself. But I had a plan. A plan to put an end to it. I got the others together, explained it to them, and we all agreed. It had to be done. When the roof was being repaired, we stole some spikes and drove them into our heads.

In the space of a week, old Doc Burns wrecked three costly skull-cutters hitting them. His requisitions for new ones drew attention, and suddenly the heat was on.

Shortly after that I was called into the "evaluation room." Five doctors in white suits sat glaring at me. Question time, you know. Only they didn't ask any. They'd already made up their minds. "You're normal," said the head doc with a sneer. "Now get the hell out of here."

Tim is halfway down the alley, an ideal spot. Soon I will overtake him. In anticipation, I touch the nub of scar tissue atop my head.

There's an art to it, really. Slipping up behind someone, positioning the spike just above, careful not to touch even a strand of hair, then bringing the mallet down hard and square on. One wallop is all it takes. Eight inches all the way in. The person collapses from the impact, giving me a moment to countersink the spike, so the only evidence is a little round abrasion, maybe a bit of bleeding, nothing to get excited about. The person is usually up and about in minutes, acting a bit erratic at first. But he soon recovers. Or she. They all recover, same as me.

Far down the alley, Tim falters. He puts down the jack-o'-lantern and braces himself against a garbage can, swaying drunkenly. "Irene, I'm no good for you," he sobs. "I'm no damned good." He drops to his knees, pushes the jack- o'-lantern aside, and vomits.

I'm behind him in an instant. Deftly poising the spike, I bring the mallet down hard. The "klok!" has a clean sound to it, a perfect hit, and he collapses like a Raggedy Ann doll.

"The lights," I whisper, crouching over him to countersink the spike. "You'll see the most beautiful lights."

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Hearing voices, I slip back into shadow. Centered in the strobing miasma of reflections at the end of the alley are two silhouettes.

"Tim? Tim, asshole. You in there?" says short vamp.

Beside her, tall vamp sobs uncontrollably.

I toe the foil-wrapped jack-o'-lantern outward until it catches fire in the moonlight.

"You really are an incredible asshole, you know that?" says short vamp, approaching. "What gives you the right to treat Irene like that?"

"Oh, Tim, it's okay," sobs tall vamp. "Let's just go home."

"Irene?" moans Tim, coming around. He begins to crawl in a circle, trying to say more, but it is slurred beyond comprehension. As he enters shadow, I put another spike in him to keep him quiet for now, then slip far back out of sight.

Soon short vamp stands over him with hands on hips. She blows a bubble. "When you finish puking your guts out, apologize to Irene."

"Tim! Oh, Tim," cries tall vamp, rushing forward to kneel at his side. "You're a mess."

"Oh, great. Yeah, baby him. He'll just keep beating on you, you know." Despite small vamp's harsh words, she kneels beside him as well.

Tall vamp tenderly touches his shoulder. "Tim, you shouldn't drink like this. It just messes you up."

I slip up behind and poise a spike over tall vamp's fiery red hair. "Klok!" fills the night, and she collapses with a quiver beside Tim.

Small vamp jumps to her feet. At first she does not see me, does not know what has happened. Then she turns, and our eyes meet. I expect her to scream. Instead, she reaches into her purse and pulls out something that gleams. Son of a gun. She's packing.

"Get back!" she shrieks. She looks down at tall vamp. "What did you do to her? What did — ? Get back!"

I step slowly toward her, hands half-lifted, mallet dangling loose in my left.

The gun shakes in her hand as she stumbles backward over garbage. "I'll shoot!" she cries.

I kick the gun and stagger amid a white explosion. My ears ring as I reach up and touch the side of my forehead. For some reason, the wetness

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makes me laugh. Through a brilliant neon sunburst I see short vamp throwing something. It hits me in the chest. I look down at her purse.

"Take it!" she shrieks. "Take everything!"

Her purse? Does she think I'm after money? I look up at her. The gun is gone. I must have kicked it out of sight. For an instant she meets my gaze. She has dazzling sea-green eyes, the kind always brimming with tears, shimmering like faceted emeralds, so wide open yet opening still wider —

"Oh dear God, please, please," she whimpers, turning away to cover her face with her hands. "Take it all. Just don't hurt me. Don't hurt any of us, please?"

She doesn't understand. None of them do. I'm not here to hurt her, or anybody. It's a thankless task, protecting these troubled souls from the worst asylum nightmare. They don't know of my good intentions, of my good deed. They don't know that they are being lobotomy-proofed.

Hands clamped over her face, she rocks back and forth, making for a difficult shot. But my timing has always been impeccable. The last spike. What a busy night this has been. I could kick myself for passing up that hardware store. With the spike moving in time to her rocking — a holding pattern over gleaming black hair — I bring the mallet down hard. "Klok!" A lone hoofbeat in the cobblestone of night. She twitches at my feet.

The jack-o'-lantern blazes in the moonlight. I sit down, wipe blood from my vision, and pick it up. Oh, what a reflective maze it is. So many pieces of the great cosmic jigsaw puzzle gathered in one spot — I gaze into its gaze, and this makes me giddy....

Tim and the two vamps begin to stir. I mustn't linger any longer. Climbing to my feet, I wait for the dizziness to pass. My eyes water, and I wipe drool from my chin. Or is it blood? "You'll understand," I whisper to them, backing away. "When you see the Photon God in all Her shattered majesty, you'll understand." Then I slink back toward the street with its puddles and glass storefronts, its staid lamps and veering headlights, and soon, very soon, a hardware store.

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Chris Willrich lives in the San Francisco Bay Area, where he works by day at a public library while pursuing a master's degree in library science. He attended the Clarion West workshop many moons ago and has previously sold stories to Asimov's *and to* The Mythic Circle. *His first appearance in our pages is a gorgeous fantasy that owes some of its inspiration to Lord Dunsany's "The Idle City."*

The Thief With Two Deaths

By Chris Willrich

ONCE IN THE RAMSHACKLE avenues where Palmary meets the sea, a poet loved a thief with two deaths. It might have been the May-December match of a hundred poor songs and a thousand worse jokes, save for two points which balanced the scales: owing to his odd condition the old thief more resembled a man of nineteen than of ninety-nine; and the young poet had a taste for graveyards.

It was in a graveyard that they sealed their fates.

Fanned by moonlit palm trees, chaperoned by star-aimed white obelisks slicing the surf's roar into baffled echoes, Persimmon Gaunt stroked the thief's dark hair and smiled. "Now I will ask the third time, and you will answer. How did you earn your name?" Her face betrayed her origin on a farm upon distant Swanisle: sturdy shoulders caught her merry cascade of red hair. Yet her cheeks were pale, and one bore the tattoo of a black spider tickling a web-snagged rose.

Imago Bone smiled back. A short burn scarred his left cheek, and a long cut spanned the neck to below the right eye. "I do not properly remember."

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"You are not senile, Bone. You may forget which palmgreaser's house you looted last, but surely you recall your fame."

As befitted his profession Imago Bone's frame was slight, though it captured all the coiled energy of a hungry ferret. He uncoiled to draw Persimmon Gaunt to the hallowed earth.

Smiling, she pushed him away. "That's a better ploy, but it too will fail."

"A better way to while one's time," he said, "than unearthing what's buried."

"What better ground to unearth it from? Where better to explain these 'Two Deaths?' Have you died twice, Bone, and returned?"

He smirked. "Nothing so familiar."

"Or are you a sorcerer, with two night angels bound in your service?"

He snorted. "Service? Now that's amusing."

"You laugh at 'service,' not 'sorcerer'? Why?"

Bone rolled and leapt, attaining an obelisk's highest seam (an action as natural to him as stretching the quill-arm was to Gaunt). He surveyed the shore. Owing to ancient regulations the desert city kept the shape of a human hand, and only the coastal Sleeve spilled away in the random manner common to living, growing towns, dangling warehouses and tenements and commoners' graveyards like loose threads. This tryst was far up the northern strand and hidden from living eyes.

Moonlight sketched his sigh. "I'm no sorcerer, thank the night. Now, then: I've already pledged to recover your manuscript from whomever stole it; surely I owe you no more."

She rose, shivering with pleasure at the wind. "'Owe'? You believe I sold my charms?"

"I did not say that. But I am not a curiosity for your morbid lyrics, Persimmon Gaunt."

"Nor did I say *that*."

"At ninety-nine I am entitled to privacy." Though Bone strutted overhead, his voice checked her laughter. He said, "Now then, from whom must I pluck your *Alley Flowers*?"

Now Gaunt sighed. "To business? Very well, if you cannot trust me with your story. It was the goblins of Hangnail Tower."

Persimmon Gaunt studied his reaction. It was as she feared.

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Imago Bone stared at her, then the stars, scratching his chin so his hand cradled the two wounds of his face. Few in Palmary knew why Imago Bone was called the Thief With Two Deaths; but all understood the Goblin Library of Hangnail Tower was no place for borrowing books.

First she feared he would refuse. Then the crimson light surrounded her, and her fears became altogether different.

BONE WAS LOST in a time eighty years gone, a journey that lasted one long heartbeat. Then his heart skipped into the present, and his skin thrilled at the nearness of doom.

It was too familiar a doom, after so long, to surprise him. Indeed, he could almost welcome it as a friend. Nonetheless, he had to challenge it.

Bone leapt to earth, tumbled to his jerkin, rose with a knife.

"Release the woman, Joyblood, or I will strike."

He pricked his own chest.

"Ah, Bone." The lips were Persimmon Gaunt's, but the voice was not.

It more resembled a choir of perfectly tuned, cackling madchildren. This was not so distracting as Gaunt's stance, for she levitated a foot above ground, cloaked in a ruby glow like sunset glinting off scarlet pools at a battlefield. She twitched like a marionette, and mocking fires danced in her eyes. "Do not struggle. Your end has come. The seeds of love have rooted in two stony hearts."

"Seeds?" Bone chuckled. "Harbinger of death at a lover's hands! And you are satisfied with *seeds*?"

Gaunt's eyebrows drooped in vexation. "What else have I to work with? Eh? Anonymous tavern wenches wooed in disguise? Bored palmgreasers' wives who wouldn't know love from caviar indigestion?"

"Concede," Bone demanded, twisting the dagger and wincing. "This poet is a devotee of nightmares, a student of decadence, and would no sooner *love* me than write poems about pretty ponies."

"You are a decadent nightmare in your own fashion," the death persisted. "Ah, be reasonable, Bone! The future romance of Bone and Gaunt is flickering in your eyes. Accept your destiny. Do not wriggle with technicalities."

"*I* wriggle?"

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Then a cold wind arose seaward, stirring pebbles and earth. A vortex of dust and spiderwebs swirled and compressed, making the sketch of a tall, hooded figure. One hand terminated in cruel pincers, the other in a sweeping scythe.

"You are late," said Bone.

"Late?" The word was like a dry breeze rustling a heap of old leaves and bones. "Three lives still twitched in the balance from your last bar fight. After eighty years my fate still astounds. I am a death, yet I spend my nights protecting life. To wit — "

And here the death sighed its way between obelisks, scythe cutting air.

"Curse you, Severstrand," said one death.

"Redundant, Joyblood," said the other.

"Be mindful of Gaunt," cried Imago Bone, and the dark angels shot him such a glance as mortals send slow-witted children.

Joyblood waved a hand; flame licked the air like burning cat-o-nine tails. Severstrand dodged waist-deep into the ground. The scythe shimmered upward into Persimmon Gaunt's belly, but Severstrand checked his blow at the last. Joyblood's essence billowed forth from the poet with a screech, like a smoke-cloud cradling its own fire-source. Gaunt slumped to the earth.

Bone crouched beside her. She still breathed. Her fingernails curved out an inch from her hands, her hair spilled to her waist, but she breathed. "You're precise as ever, Severstrand. Thank you."

"I do not want your thanks. I want your end. I want you to perish, friendless, loveless, in cold despair."

"I do not take it personally, Severstrand."

"I am glad, for I do respect you, Bone. Though you must die."

The scythe twitched a little; but Joyblood shimmered into new solidity, all smoke and flame, eyes and mouth shining like rubies beside a prince's fireplace. "He is not for you, decrepit one. That woman will love him."

Severstrand proffered a thin, spiderwebbed smile. "Indeed? As he's loved by the courtesans of the Pinky Palisade? The whores of Thumbbottom?"

"Those are sparks beside the bonfire. Ah, why do you never relent, Severstrand? I offer Bone a death of wild romance!"

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Severstrand shrugged. "I offer an end. Nasty, brutish, short. Anything else is sugarcoating."

Bone coughed. "Let me register again my desire to expire peacefully in bed, surrounded by adoring women and an ill-gotten hoard."

Both deaths turned in scorn.

"But if the matter is buried for now," Bone said, "I would like my privacy."

Joyblood bowed. "Ah, very well. Passion will out. Shall we adjourn to a mortuary, decrepit foe, and debate over games of chance?"

Severstrand nodded. "Very well, mad opponent, if the odds are long. Enjoy your dalliance, Bone. I will destroy you later."

"Happy dicing." The two deaths faded from the air like morning mist.

Bone reviewed Gaunt's sleeping form, and uncharacteristically he did not linger upon her physicality but tried to divine something of her heart. Here was a pale woman who idolized the grave; yet a brush with death gave flush to her cheeks, left her chest pulsing steadily with the ancient greed for air. And here was Imago Bone, dancing between two headstones marked with his name, as though the liveliness of his feet defied the narrowness of the ground. Gaunt thought she understood death, but truly, it was life she embraced.

Bone caressed the spiderweb tattoo of her cheek, and her eyelids fluttered.

"That was..." she said, "that was..."

"That was," Bone said with a smirk, "you might say, my family. And the reason I will take your commission, and storm the Goblin Library. As I should have done eighty years gone."

At sunset next day, poet and thief crossed from the Sleeve through the Bracelet Wall and onto Via Viva toward the Fingers, threading the shadows of the towers.

All the Spiral Sea knew the towers of Palmary, nine, ten, eleven story monstrosities of brick, adobe, granite. They were monuments to the hubris of rich palmgreasers, but more to the point, they were an outgrowth of zoning laws. To secure certain magical advantages, Palmary proper took the form of a human hand. Roads mirrored lifelines; hills mimicked the mounds of the palm; canals irrigated digit-like boulevards, with the

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spaces between surrendered to the sands. Violators lost fingers, so the city clawed enthusiastically skyward, and it was said that birds scorned the palm branches for belfries, and that bats and squirrels outnumbered their cousins the rats, and that true cat burglars the world over died and went to Palmary.

But there was one tower unstained, untouched by burglar or squirrel. Certain bats flew there only, a rare breed that alighted in silence.

The Hangnail Tower was hardly Palmary's tallest, but it stood alone. It rose nine stories in the sharp lines of a graveyard obelisk, and all its stone was tarnished gray. Near the top, scores of severed fingers dangled from their tips upon irregularly-spaced iron spikes. Rearing in the sunset where the desert lapped the end of Index Road, the tower attained a hue of scabrous blood.

From their vantage in a narrow lane between manor houses, Gaunt said, "I've never been so close to the home of the kleptomancers."

"And you'll get no closer," Bone said. He wore a signature costume of black leather studded with various tools and weapons. Fully half of these were balsa wood fakes, to intimidate anyone he came across. He would never carry so much real weight. "You'll await me at the assigned place, until I return with my prizes."

"Prizes? There is something beside my manuscript?"

Bone laughed. "There are many things beside your manuscript. But there is one thing in particular that I will need for my salvation, and yours. The most terrible of tomes. Nothing else will do."

Gaunt looked doubtful. "Bone, I wonder now if it was right to steer you this way. The tower will be riddled with traps, and now this book..."

"You are a wise woman," Bone said, wrestling free a sewer grate from the cobblestones, "but still a young one, though you wish otherwise. You do not see that sometimes even we old folk must toss the dice. I may die, but it is a reasonable risk. Much more reasonable than another eighty years with my friends Joyblood and Severstrand."

"I still do not understand about them...."

"Pray you never do. Now wait one hour, then make for the location I showed you."

He slipped down into darkness.

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Gaunt replaced the grate. She shivered as the sky purpled and blossomed with stars.

A whisper came to her. "I will teach you, Persimmon Gaunt, what you wish to know."

HANGNAIL TOWER was divided in three parts.

The lowest level (which Imago Bone trod, light as a famished ant) housed the bureaucrats who ran the city in the kleptomancers' name. It also sheltered vaults bursting with coins, gems, tapestries — all the wealth the kleptomancers seized from the palmgreaser elite. The kleptomancers did not prize such things; but their vassals did, and that was all that mattered.

The topmost level formed the sanctum of these sorcerers of theft, from which they regarded their strange instrument, the city. For Palmary itself was like the hand of a thief, stealing the magical energies of the surrounding land and sea.

And all the space between held the Goblin Library, sheltering the only treasure the kleptomancers loved for itself.

At the Library doorstep Imago Bone drew a dagger he'd nicked from a kleptomancer eighty years ago, and which he had employed only once. It was slender and silver, its hilt took the shape of a slender tome, and the blade glinted with intricate notches as Bone waved it before the door.

The Library possessed but three portals. One led to the kleptomancers' sanctum. Another opened from the Goblin Reading Room onto empty air. The door Bone pondered in flickering light was a huge brass panel proclaiming *Ex Nihilo* in the style of a bookplate. A sculpted goblin face, three-eyed, with bat ears and a single nostril, grinned a brassy grin. Its third eye cradled a torch.

Sweating, Bone slid the blade into the goblin-nostril. He twisted.

There was no reassuring click. Instead, there was a thin whistle.

His sweating redoubled, and he sheathed the dagger and covered his face with a mesh woven of sweetair leaves. With one hand he flicked open a metal case bearing six customized, notched daggers.

As he worked the lock, Bone's neck tingled in the accustomed way. Was Joyblood nearby, *tsking* at the passionless nature of death by gas? Severstrand, displeased it might be painless?

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The second dagger worked.

Bone advanced, welcoming cool, moldy air.

The Library filled seven stories. Or would have, had there been stories to speak of.

Instead it was one vast chamber, festooned with balconies which were linked by a mad arrangement of rising and falling staircases. The stairway railings shimmered with hundreds of glass spheres, each aglow from dozens of trapped, luminescent insects. But the balconies had no railings; that would have meant less room for the bookshelves.

The shelves' hollows clutched motley volumes sheathed in cracked bindings and cobwebs; while their frames scowled with goblin calligraphy, proclaiming each balcony a branch of knowledge in the goblin bibliographic system.

Thus Imago Bone knew he crept through the Alcove of Martyrs (whose urns cradled the ashes of incinerated books) and thence to the Vault of the Vanished (whose squarish marble statues honored books lost to time). Beyond these he arrived at a major fork dividing the Library into halves: books written by the left-handed and the right-handed. Bone's forehead wrinkled, and he jogged left.

The directions in the memoirs of Dolman the Charmed were tantalizing but unspecific; and Bone himself had been here but once. So he pattered cautiously through the balconies: Cynical Stories by Innocents; Innocent Stories by Cynics; Polite Arguments for Cracking Heads; Coming-of-Age-Tales-cum-Cruelty-Manuals; Vast Philosophical Systems Proving Why Mommy Was Wrong; Books Proudly Shocking the Sensibilities of a Generation Already Dead; Books with Excessive Use of Semicolons.

"You risk much, old companion," came a disembodied whisper, and Bone knew it drifted to his ears alone.

"Really, Severstrand?"

"The librarians are admirably bloody-minded."

Bone allowed a smile. "Would that satisfy you? Bloody or not, it wouldn't be by your hand."

He leapt silently past bookshelves contrived to sprout blades and sandwich idle browsers. The sepulchral voice followed him. "That is a point." Severstrand sighed. "I have fallen somewhat, Bone. Once I would not have hounded my prey so."

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"Once it was merely a duty, killing people."

"Quite. Personal attendance was unnecessary. A true night angel is an arranger. Somewhat like a mortal florist. I needed only a touch of fever, a few old worries, some slippery cobblestones, and a frightened horse team. I no more needed to manifest than the florist needs to kiss the young lady personally. Nevertheless..."

"Nevertheless, you and Joyblood have hounded me for eighty years. Is that not enough?" Here Bone avoided the attractive "fallen" book sculpted of everlasting glue.

"I confess I sometimes tire of the matter, Bone. And yet. If I quit the field, Joyblood triumphs. Death at the hands of a lover — utter melodrama! It dishonors you and the cold eye you've turned upon life."

"Why, thank you."

"Of course. However, death by the fury of goblin librarians — that might do. I regret the end of our conversations, Imago Bone."

"They have been diverting," Bone agreed, ducking under the invisible wire rigged to topple an upper stack brimming with bricks in leather covers. "But I am not finished yet."

"Soon," Severstrand said. "And then I may destroy my foe."

Bone stopped. "You would attack Joyblood? Even with me gone?"

"Of course. Joyblood feels the same. Our feud has lingered too long, Bone. It demands satisfaction. But that — and all else — is beyond your concern. Farewell."

There came a gentle *swoosh* from far overhead; and a few seconds later an oversized bat with human hands for claws tumbled dead at Bone's feet.

As the bookbat's *thud* echoed among the balconies, there rose an excited murmuring from all around, as the goblin librarians looked up from their shelving and straightening, cataloging and indexing, and scampered hissing toward the sound.

Persimmon Gaunt brandished a dagger, mainly to salve her pride before Joyblood possessed her anew. But the crimson apparition merely sighed. "Ah, have no fear, mortal! Although you would love Imago Bone in time, I concede you are unripe for my purposes."

"I'm no romantic," Gaunt said, lowering the blade. "In fact your little speech just slew any spark I might have felt."

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"Please tell yourself that; you will fall all the harder. Not that it matters, anymore."

"Whatever do you mean?"

"The wheel has turned. Imago Bone has gone home."

"Home? The Hangnail Tower?"

"Where Bone, as he is now, was born. Where he has returned to die. And in a gruesome fashion that will no doubt please my rival."

Persimmon Gaunt felt something graveyard poets are not supposed to feel. "Does he seek his own destruction there? And did I push him in?"

"I believe the answer to both is Yes — but do not blame yourself! The Tower has haunted him for eight decades. He had to return."

"Tell me why."

"As you wish." The red miasma's eyes flickered. "When Imago Bone was truly nineteen his heart was like a torch fanned by a gale, and the windstorm was a woman. She was a kleptomancer of Hangnail Tower, and he was a street thief, down from the Contrariwise Coast seeking fortune, beckoned by the hand of Palmary. The kleptomancer Vine stole the young man's gaze, but she loved and abandoned him, as the kleptomancers are wont. Worse, she berated him for weakness, never elaborating on the theme.

"Like many men before, Bone was flogged to madness by this word 'weak.' He pursued her. He hunted all talk of her. Of late, he learned, she dallied with many men from the poorer creases of the great hand...but primarily she shared the bed of the kleptomancer Remora. Now, as this rival treated Vine with imperious contempt, Bone supposed there was a chance — nay, a duty — to replace him. And yet Vine spurned Bone's advances and clung to Remora, for that alliance brought power to both."

"A sad tale," said Gaunt. "It seems to me Bone was better off without love."

"Without love?" jeered the death. "It is the brightest light of existence."

"But not the only. Can not the sun share sky with the stars, the moon?"

"The sun banishes the rest."

"Perhaps because it is jealous, and craves all eyes. And does it not blind?"

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"Feh...I will not argue with poets. Remember: the end of all arguments is silence."

"Do not be silent yet. How does the story end?"

"With a beginning. For at last Bone's passion whipped him toward the Hangnail Tower. He purchased — not stole — one perfect violet. No roses for him! So armed, Bone sought to fling himself at his lady's feet. Luck and stealth, but mainly the first, bore him through the Goblin Library. At last he attained Vine's chambers — but she was not alone."

"Remora was there, taking his pleasure."

"Not in the sense you mean," said the death. "The two stood amidst a dozen bound and gagged citizens of Palmary, six women and six men. Gore streaked the room, as Remora and Vine fed, into a burning brazier, the first victim's heart."

"No," Gaunt whispered. The grave, skeletons, decay — these things stirred Persimmon Gaunt's soul; but cruelty was something else.

"It was then," Joyblood said, "that Imago Bone understood why Vine the kleptomancer called him weak. She meant that he was weak in magic, and thus an undesirable sacrifice. That is the way of kleptomancy, for its power turns on theft. And to metaphorically *and* physically steal hearts, well, that is quite a path to power. Vine and Remora meant to become immortal."

"Ah, Bone," Gaunt said, and her heart contracted in sympathy.

And at that moment Joyblood the death looked into her soul and nodded with satisfaction. Then he was gone.

AFTER SEVERSTRAND dropped his noisy parting gift, Bone flung a rope and ascended from Kitchen Sink Narratives to Thin Painful Volumes. From there he scampered this way and that, until he spotted the rumored blue volume that triggered a spinning shelf, leading to Non-Sentient Cookery. There he listened, cold sweat glistening in the dim, flickering light.

The goblin librarians were notorious lovers of tales and infamous collectors of tomes. Their bookbats scoured the city for both. But these obsessions were distinct.

Goblins believed a living tale was a spoken tale, and in the writing was

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slain, lying still and unchanging. Therefore the Library was a mausoleum, and the most a visitor might do was offer complimentary bookmarks of pressed flowers, which the librarians placed in the honored tome. Browsing was forbidden, borrowing unheard of — unless you were one of the goblins' patrons, the kleptomancers. Such privileges were tolerated as sad necessity.

The presence of any other browser could make a goblin librarian chartreuse with rage.

Bone heard more scampering from nearby, and excited *glurpings*. He squeezed between shelves, then leapt to the alcove for Simple Things Made Obtuse.

Skidding, he bumped a stack. Three flights below, a goblin troop shrieked and clambered upward. Bone caught a glimpse of their variable shapes: jutting noses, gray pockmarked skin, glowing yellow eyes (one to three apiece). Each bore a long catalog-card file strapped to its back.

Bone smirked and snapped one of his balsa daggers; within was a glass bead. He tossed the bead and it shattered among the goblins, bathing the area with noxious fog. Bone turned and ran — but two flights up he encountered another troop, squeaking in fury.

They unsheathed the copper rods of their card files, each one slender and honed to a point, scored with old ink and blood.

Bone jumped sideways, wriggled himself into a crack, and toppled a collection of scholarly offerings, smiling thinly at the cries of outrage and pain. He threw another rope to an upper alcove, and climbed.

As he ascended he glanced up to spot a huge goblin grinning furiously (beneath the shelf for Tales That Could Not Have Been Written By Their Dead Narrators). The goblin clutched an enormous tome, the very *Anthro-Goblin Cataloging Rules, Thirteenth Edition.*

"Curse you for requiring this," said the goblin. It dropped the book.

Bone had an instant to admire its binding, its stately solidity, its weight.

After Joyblood vanished, Persimmon Gaunt hurried to a haycart stashed in an alley up Index Road. She suspected Joyblood, despite all denials, hoped to employ her in slaying Bone. Of course, she thought, her heart did not truly belong to Bone — but if the death believed it, the thief

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was still endangered. If she fled across the city, Joyblood could not use her.

Yet if she were not at Hangnail Tower, according to plan, Bone might die anyway. A nasty, brutish death, satisfying Severstrand.

She gripped the reigns, but could not decide where to go.

"Horns of a dilemma, my dear?"

She shivered: the shadowy death himself appeared, sketched in old soot and moonlight. Ghostly spiders crawled upon his non-substance. Yet this apparition suited her better than Joyblood's flames. Gaunt found her voice. "You can read my thoughts?"

"No. Better to say I sense their tenor, when I am their subject."

"I've just spoken with Joyblood."

"That is why I appeared."

"He believes Bone's race is run."

"It may be so. It would be fitting if he died at Hangnail Tower, home of his tormentors."

She frowned. "You're not speaking of you and Joyblood, are you? You refer to the kleptomancers, Remora and Vine."

"Indeed. Please do not think ill of us, Persimmon Gaunt. Though we two deaths are antagonists, we share a respect for Imago Bone. We often speak of him while he sleeps. (Death in sleep would satisfy neither, you understand.) We wish him a poetic ending, after our own fashion, no worse."

"I fear I must think ill of you, Severstrand."

"I am sad."

"But I may think worse of others. You are an instrument, I would guess. Vine and Remora's?"

"Remora's. Joyblood is Vine's doing."

Gaunt frowned. "But you work at cross purposes."

"Quite. And rather than ending Bone's life we have stretched it unnaturally — all because of two enraged and careless kleptomancers."

"Enraged because he interrupted their ceremony?"

"Worse." Severstrand paced about the cart. The horses shivered as if scoured by hail. "We deaths sense the circumstances of our summonings, as you recall a fading dream. So I still taste the bile in Imago Bone's throat as he beheld the butchery. It was not that Bone was a good man. Rather, he saw what he might have become, had his own greed been augmented

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by magic. And a small, pathetic portion of him still ached at Vine's dismissal, and wished to stand by her side."

"What did he do?"

"He acted quickly. In that a common thief may best a kleptomancer. He kicked open the shutters, so those within other towers might witness the crime, and those upon Index Road might hear. Then — in the most unseemly romantic fashion — he swung by the rope of a tapestry into the fray. He had no plan, only anger, and he tossed upon the fire the blossom he'd carried for Vine.

"You are unversed in kleptomancy, Persimmon Gaunt. Understand that this violet was in no sense stolen, and represented as honest a love as Imago Bone could muster. It was the antithesis of the spell. The flames died and the ceremony was lost."

Gaunt's mind thrilled with the image. "He fought them then?"

Severstrand chuckled, and across the alley a cloud of moonlit gnats tumbled to earth. "He might say so. But in truth he fled the tower. After the initial fury he knew fear and shame: though he now despised his paramour, her contempt still stung."

"How like a man, swayed by beauty though a monster wears it."

"The pair swore to punish Bone for his infatuation with Vine; but the senior kleptomancers locked them away for a month. Such was their sentence for murdering gutter trash. But in their separate cells, Remora and Vine pronounced frightful curses, tapping the power of their one stolen heart. Though they could not become immortal, they each had enough strength to raise a death for Imago Bone. Yet their arrogance betrayed them. For each believed the opposite sex to be simple, easy to predict. Thus they assumed they could anticipate each other's curse, doubling its strength. In fact, all they understood of each other was a shared lust for power.

"Remora cursed Bone to die in despair, never again knowing love. While Vine swore the next woman to love him would doom him."

Gaunt said, "And so Bone survived."

The spectre nodded. "And in his own way, prospered. When Joyblood and I emerged from the vaults of the night we embraced as kin. Then we fought. Evenly matched, we settled into a long game of waiting and watching. I will never forget Bone's laughter when he understood."

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"What a strange life." Gaunt patted the horses, more to reassure herself than the team. "Bone, protected for eighty years by a stalemate of deaths. Neither can allow the other to claim him. Neither can allow age to touch him. Meanwhile, Joyblood must keep thrusting women into his path, while you must...kill them?"

"Frighten. Even were I inclined otherwise, Bone has charged us to protect all sentients near him, or he shall end his life. Such self-sacrifice would thwart us both." The death shook his cowled head. "His barfights are particularly vexing."

"He must be lonely."

Severstrand's eyes took on an eerie, moonlit glow. "One would suppose he would despair. But he has not."

"He has you for company, I suppose."

The death shook his head, his thin voice wavering oddly. "I must away. Joyblood will undo my latest attempt."

"Why did you come at all, Severstrand?" Gaunt demanded. "If you think me Joyblood's tool you have not frightened me, much."

The death shrugged, turned his back, and vanished.

"Did you need to explain yourself?" Gaunt asked the air. "Be forgiven?"

She thought a long moment, watching a few hardy gnats buzz about the alley.

"Be careful, Bone," she said, "for I do feel something for you, after all."

She stirred the horses toward the tower. They were eager to depart, unaware they followed the source of their fear.

Bone's bones complained in seven places, but at least the chair was comfortable.

Chair?

Opening his eyes, Bone decided he sat in the Reading Room: tomes sprawled upon chairs, desks, and pedestals, awash in multihued light from stained-glass windows depicting goblin storytellers regaling goblin crowds. And besides, there was a goblin crowd surrounding him now.

They prodded him with cardfile-rods. "See, O Rex Libris," said one. "See! It is the Imago Bone, he who recently trespassed."

"Eighty years ago," Bone clarified.

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The massive goblin bearing the *Cataloging Rules* laughed and sneezed through his single nostril. He was the very model of the brass face of the lower doorway. "I *do* remember you, Imago Bone. I know the stories; some of them found final rest here. As have you. I am honored."

All assembled looked at the Rex Libris in surprise.

"Do not stare! Are we not goblins? Do we not love stories? Look around you, Bone, behold our vice. Bookbats return each morning, clutching tomes to inter." The Rex Libris nodded at an oaken door between stained-glass panels, a door that led to empty air.

"Can you not forgive our temptation to learn the books' secrets, to speak, as it were, with the dead? So we read each acquisition, savor it — then shelve it forever and speak of it no more. Can we condemn those who would share such pleasure? No, we can merely kill them. So I must admire your attempt. Please satisfy my curiosity. Which book?"

"Will the answer prolong my life?"

"For a time."

"Then for a time I will answer. I seek not one, but two volumes."

"The nerve!" shrieked some goblins, and "The courage!" squeaked others.

"The first," Bone said, "is a thin volume of poetry even now, I suspect, on loan to your landlords. For the sake of this *Alley Flowers* I am merely traversing your domain to their sanctum. It is for the sake of friendship, and a nominal fee."

The Rex Libris chuckled. "For this, I might release you with a maiming. The kleptomancers have grown thoughtless in their borrowing. Only half of us had the opportunity to read this brooding verse. Such funereal splendor! But what of the other book?"

"Ah. That. It is a cursed tome, O bibliophiles, and most rare. Even connoisseurs of such material whisper its name, if they know it at all."

"Ah," said the Rex Libris with cheerful interest, "a student of blasphemous power. You seek the *Nominus Umbra*."

"Nothing so grand."

"The dread *Geisthammer* then."

"No."

The goblin frowned and scratched its chin. "*Dead Richard's Almanac*?"

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"No. This book's fame is rather circumscribed. Even among scholars willing to risk being whisked off to the stars by amorphous things with shadowy wings — even among such sturdy folk, few will speak of it."

"You mock me. I would know of such a book."

"I think not. *Mashed Rags Bound in Dead Cow* is not a book that inspires bibliography."

The gauntlet was thrown. The room filled with the susurrant flipping of thousands of pages.

"No such title!" meeped a goblin.

"He lies!" gurgled another.

"Take him to the bindery!" chirped a third.

"No," rumbled the Rex Libris. "For his insolence we shall brand him with hot accession stamps."

Then the Rex Libris shuddered in a cocoon of crimson light.

"Hello, Joyblood."

"This one admires you, Bone, despite his outrage. It is almost love."

"You wouldn't."

"Fear not. I have other plans." Joyblood raised the Rex Libris's voice. "Friends! Lovers of books! Read elsewhere, please."

The goblins waved their cardfile rods.

"Do not — " Bone said.

"Do not kill them, I know," sighed Joyblood.

Joyblood spat red fire, singeing the carpet. Sparks fell near a pile of books. The goblins dropped their rods and backed away, hands raised.

Joyblood said, "You would save even these creatures! Ah, you've grown soft, foolish, sentimental. I am pleased. Soon you'll earn your death by romance." He scratched the nose of the Rex Libris. "May I ask why this *Mashed Rags Bound in Dead Cow* is so important?"

Bone rose and stretched. "Sometimes the best weapon is one the enemy already owns."

Joyblood said, "It is a weapon, not a book?"

"In a sense all books are weapons, but this more than most."

Joyblood laughed, the Rex Libris's chest heaving. "Ah, keep your secrets, Bone. You always plan fascinating thefts. I shall miss you."

Bone lowered his head. "I'll miss you too, O romantic."

"Ah, so you sense I'll succeed!"

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Bone sighed. "I simply buckle under life's despair."

"Despair.... You do not intend to give yourself to that boor Severstrand?"

Bone smiled, shrugged, and left the room.

"Severstrand?" Joyblood cried. "Show yourself!"

Bone waited around the corner until Severstrand's whispers answered Joyblood's wail. Good: they would argue for a time.

Unhindered, Bone stalked the alcoves. At last he came to Stories About Rich And Beautiful People Stupider Than Ourselves. There on a low shelf stood *Mashed Rags Bound in Dead Cow*, caked in a thin layer of dust.

There is no better way to hide a book than to misfile it in a library.

It had taken twenty years to trace the hints to the whispers to the legends; to bribe witnesses under moonglow and scour testaments by candlelight. The thing's compiler was long dead, the various authors in worse states. All the owners had met bizarre accidents. But rash scholars had skimmed its pages and scribbled warnings in the margins of their journals. One, Dolman the Charmed, sorcerer and thief, unearthed the thing itself. He read a page and burned a year of his notorious luck in one day. It was the horrified Dolman who slipped into the Goblin Library forty years past — not to steal books, but to bury one. Yet Dolman had his pride, and coded the location into his memoirs.

Imago Bone lifted the book. It did not bite. He blew dust from its uninscribed cover.

Then he was off, vaulting up the stairs, as energetic as the day he turned sixty.

The topmost landing was empty of books. Overhead loomed a dark opening fragrant with guano, beyond which bookbats chittered of titles and covers. Bone hurried across the landing and opened a palmwood door.

Outsiders imagined the kleptomancers lived among silk and jewels, for the sorcerers wore such things outside. But among themselves they dropped pretensions. The high chambers had all the elegance of a well-ventilated dungeon.

The only decorations were baubles glinting under glass covers in the torchlit stairway Bone ascended: here a wooden pony missing one leg; there a stone block with a half-sculpted face; and now a circle of human

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skin, caressed by the tattoo of a woman's name. He saw nothing he would steal, and arrived at the uppermost chamber.

"Imago Bone," said a woman who seemed fifty, standing upon a carpet of drab, woven rope. "It has been so long."

"So long," echoed a man of perhaps sixty, perched upon a wooden stool behind a vast granite desk, "to find the nerve to return?"

Vine and Remora had aged at a crawl, but aged nonetheless. And they had not aged well: she seemed a skin garment cinched across sharp bones, while sagging, glistening flesh embellished his frown.

"Nerve?" Holding the tome behind him, Bone edged nearer the desk and its one feature, a battered manuscript below a glass cover. "Nerve is for youth. I should never have survived Hangnail Tower. Yet your two deaths — " he raised his face and the burn and scar framing it " — showed me I had years to hone my skills. At thirty I contemplated return. At forty I itched to try. But to what end? Your own lives are a better revenge than any I could devise."

"You deny your weakness," said Vine. "Weak in magic, weak in courage. How you disappointed me." She adjusted herself as if he must still find her attractive.

"You have aged," chuckled Remora, "but learned nothing. Do you even know what you want? We cannot lift your curse."

"No, but you can lift that glass."

They blinked in confusion. "This?" Remora raised the glass, fingered the stack of pages. "A minor poet's spew? I just acquired this trifle and meant to mock its innocent evocations of despair. It is nothing."

"It is everything, to the one who lost it."

Remora smiled. "You *have* learned something. Yes, the passion of the former owner, that does matter, if you've learned to taste it, devour it. But you are deficient in magic, and cannot join us. Even if you could, this book is but a token."

"Nothing like stealing a dozen hearts."

Vine smirked. "Nothing at all."

Bone said, "Nevertheless. It is Persimmon Gaunt's sweat and toil. I would have it back."

Vine smiled. "You love her."

Bone shrugged.

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"Come," chuckled Remora, "we are both old men. We know what young smiles conjure."

"I still have my lechery, kleptomancer, thank the gods. But I am not here for that. I like Gaunt. She reminds me what I've lost."

"You are in love," Vine said, "vulnerable to my curse."

"No, Vine," said her companion. "Mine awaits. Abnegation. Despair. Why should we give you this book?"

"Why not?" Bone said.

"Because it would please you. Even now we steal that thwarted pleasure."

Bone sighed. "Very well. I did come prepared to bargain. I carry a rare tome."

Vine's eyes narrowed. "Let us see."

Bone slid the volume across the table. Vine gingerly opened it.

"'I tell you truly,'" she read, "'death is neither romantic nor grim. It merely *is*, and what it is most, is humiliating. My own last words were, 'Fools! The longbow is a child's weapon...'"

Vine frowned, passed the book to Remora, who flipped to the middle.

Vine said "What in the five corners is this, Bone?"

"The testimony of one thousand ghosts, one per page, all of whom died in foolish or freakish ways."

"'So I told my brothers,'" read Remora, "'see, candleflames don't hurt. But as I waved my finger I knocked the whole candle over, whence it spun into the face of Father's mastiff, who promptly mauled my groin...'" Remora looked up in disgust. "This is a significant tome? Even Gaunt's poetry has more merit."

"Its merit is not literary."

"Certainly not," Remora said. "Such anecdotes should be forgotten; they steal all meaning from life."

He slammed the cover so fiercely that an old flaw in a stool-leg fractured, pitching him forward into a crunching impact with the corner of the stone desk. He slumped dead to the floor.

"Eh? Remora?" Vine appeared more irritated at Remora's stupidity than concerned for his safety. As she imperiously approached, she tripped over a loose rope of the carpet. Her head shattered the glass dome upon the

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table, and by freak happenstance, several large glass wedges impaled her face and throat. She gurgled and expired.

"It is neither romantic nor tragic," Bone said, nipping both books from the table. "But it will do."

THE READING ROOM was empty of speaking things. The deaths had vanished and the goblins still hid in the twistings of the library. So Bone had a clear path to the door of the bookbats.

He fell seven stories. But he'd read no story in *Mashed Rags Bound in Dead Cow*, so he had a chance.

And Persimmon Gaunt waited below, with a horsecart full of hay.

As he groaned, she drove them back to the alley, calling repeatedly, "You have it? You have it, Bone? Are you all right?"

"Yes, yes, quieter please."

When they were quite alone she leapt into the hay and kissed him. "I will copy my *Alley Flowers* now, I think. Thank you, Imago Bone. You've returned my life to me."

"You had more poems in you. Better poems."

"But not these poems. You risked all for my children, here. Yet I would not have asked this of you, had I known what I know now. At least, that is what I wish to believe."

"Eh? Know what?"

Ruddy light flared above them, as Joyblood cried, "I have succeeded! This woman loves you, Bone, just enough."

"Just enough," Gaunt whispered.

"And yet I must ask a question before I whip her into murderous, jealous rage."

"A question I share," whispered a cold voice from the flickering shadows. "How is it," Severstrand asked, "that two such as Remora and Vine could perish so suddenly, without even a night angel to claim them?"

"Behold, gentledeaths," said Bone, rising and lifting the answer. "The accursed tome that slew them."

"I am versed in accursed tomes," hissed Severstrand. "I recognize it not."

"You mock us," wailed Joyblood.

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"Not at all. This tome distills the essence of perverse and pointless deaths. It pronounces existence meaningless and absurd."

Joyblood said, "Foolishness! Life screams with meaning!"

Severstrand said, "Joyblood may fear such a work. But it would suit me well."

The shadowy death approached, as the crimson death hesitated.

Imago Bone raised the tome higher, and Severstrand grew hazy, like half-glimpsed midnight smoke. Hissing thinly, he backed away and grew more substantial, gasping as if for breath.

"Old companion," said Bone sadly, "you represent despair. But despair, like passion, is a *meaning*. This book embodies meaninglessness. Not a cosmos cold and cruel, but one like a blank page, adorned in one corner by a smeared insect. No poetry, not even graveyard verse. And without poetry, even you cannot endure."

"Joyblood," Severstrand wheezed. "You allowed this."

"I? *You* interfered at every step. Persimmon Gaunt is but my latest success. Had you stepped aside...."

"I could not! I was his death!"

"Bah. I shall be yours."

Scythe met fire. Stray sparks lit the hay.

The inhabitants of Index Road would have nightmares for days, but only Bone and Gaunt would understand the cause, and they but dimly.

Joyblood's fire-whips blazed the light of love denied, and bits of burning cobweb rose on the wind. But Severstrand's scythe-hand hissed the promise of final darkness, and the wave of pure morbidity parted the primal fires: and Joyblood screamed. But the fires rejoined, and the scream became a crackling, a cackling.

All along Index Road people shuddered as the fires of obsession cast the shadows of despair, and they fled, or fell to their knees and awaited world's end. Imago Bone and Persimmon Gaunt felt their souls tremble in their bodies, buffeted by hot and cold winds they felt beneath the skin.

Had the deaths been equal, they might have struggled until the city dissolved, its reality torn by opposite dooms. But Severstrand had been damaged by the accursed book, and at last his substance smoldered from Joyblood's fire, and he collapsed against a refuse heap, harried by gnats.

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His scythe and snippers twitched, but could not ward Joyblood. The other death, shrunken but burning bright, laughed in triumph and raised the arm of fiery whips.

"Stop!"

The two deaths stared. So did Imago Bone.

Persimmon Gaunt stood before the two deaths, palms raised. "No," shouted Bone, rushing to her side.

She pushed him away. "How can you allow this?" she asked him.

"Allow? They are deaths!"

"They are *your* deaths. How can you let them perish?"

Bone stared in bewilderment; and the deaths were too startled to move.

Gaunt said, "The night angels embody poetic endings, yes? Well, *I* am a poet, you fools. I wrote my *Alley Flowers* in a place such as this. I cannot stand here and watch one poem slay another."

She walked between the deaths.

"Leave us," Severstrand whispered.

"Go!" Joyblood raged.

Bone watched for a heartbeat that seemed eight decades long. Then he raised *Mashed Rags Bound in Dead Cow.*

"Joyblood. Hold your anger. Or I will read from the book."

Joyblood said, "I would regret your death, Bone, but it is no longer my obsession."

Desperate, Bone said, "But consider! If I, the Thief With Two Deaths, die of freak happenstance in an alley, what would the tales say about the angels of the night?"

"They would say you are irrelevant," Gaunt declared. "There would be no fear, no awe."

Joyblood hesitated.

Bone jumped to the cobblestones. "But if not that, consider this. For eighty years, who have been my companions? Not my dalliances, not my clients or rivals or marks. You. We have not been friends. But who has bandied philosophy beneath eclipses and beside battlefields? Who has championed maximum-casualty chess? Who has lit scores of birthday candles, and who has snuffed them?

"We have walked together O deaths, and your shadows have comforted

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me." Bone regarded his tome. "I fear my ending, but even more I fear the world as revealed in this book. Should one of you vanish, we come closer to that reality."

Silently, the deaths regarded him.

At last Joyblood said, "We are not friends, we three."

Severstrand said, "Do not mock us, Bone, at the end."

"I do not mock, and we are not friends. Do as you will."

He flung the book into the burning hay. It would not be damaged, but for now it would be difficult to touch.

Joyblood lowered his blazing head and edged backward. With his shears Severstrand scratched his cobwebbed chin. They regarded one another.

Then moldy death and blazing death each gave a nod as fleeting as rose petals upon a grave.

They walked toward opposite ends of the alley, but never reached the streets. They dwindled as they went, like birds, then bees, then fireflies, then like the memory of fireflies. And Bone and Gaunt were alone.

She took his hand. "I've spent lifetimes stealing," he said, watching the fire, "but today you have given me something new."

"What will you do now, Thief With One Life?"

He smirked. "To begin, I have an accursed book on my conscience, and no place to hide it. I must find one. It may be a long journey. And, Gaunt, I've forgotten how to live, without the company of deaths."

"There are ways," she said, drawing him closer. "I do not know if Joyblood was correct about me, Bone, but if I swear not to slay you in a fit of passion, perhaps we can learn.

"For they say the nearness of death awakens certain appetites, and I would like to see for myself."

(Thanks to Becky Willrich for suggestions on the two deaths.)

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CURIOSITIES

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE MOUNTAIN, BY MICHEL BERNANOS

WHEN I was thirteen I was handed a book by a friend. The cover art was off-putting — a red ocean, a mountain in the background with a human heart at its center, the head of a statue in the foreground. I hesitated to accept it, but this friend, who wasn't much of a reader, stared at me for a moment and said, "You've got to." Now, thirty years later, I remember that book more vividly than anything else I have ever read.

The Other Side of the Mountain is narrated by a boy of eighteen who wakes, after a night of drunken revelry, on a ship at sea. Within the first few pages he is nearly drowned by the crew for no other reason than the sport of it. The ship's cook, a crafty old sailor named Toine, takes the boy under his wing and makes him an apprentice.

The ship is soon becalmed and starvation and thirst make the crew insane. A mutiny follows in which the captain is killed and then eaten. When the winds begin to blow again, they bring a typhoon, which sinks the ship. Only the boy and Toine survive, floating on the broken mast in a sea as red as blood. They are washed up onto a strange land and begin to explore it. Here, the story unhinges into the surreal, leading to an ending that is devastating.

Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* is an antecedent to Bernanos's story, but it doesn't approach the latter's power. The writing is so deceptively simple, yet manages to convey great cruelty and horror and always a certain underlying beauty that draws the reader along through the nightmare.

Michel Bernanos, a French writer, spent his early years turning out thrillers under assumed names. Upon nearing his fortieth year, he decided to write something of depth that he would be proud to apply his real name to. He was barely forty when he died, having just completed this masterpiece of twentieth-century fantasy. It was published posthumously.

—Jeffrey Ford

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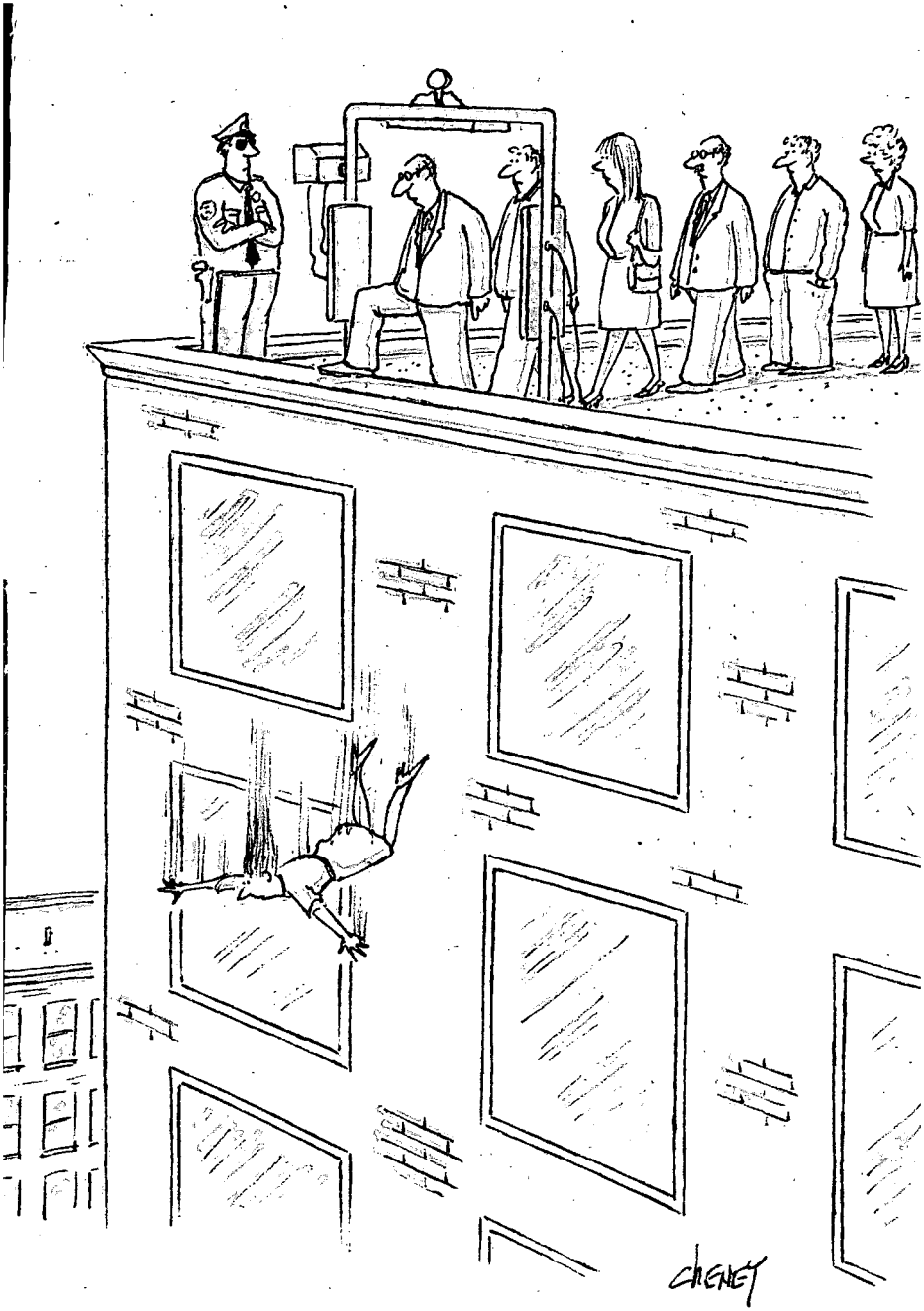

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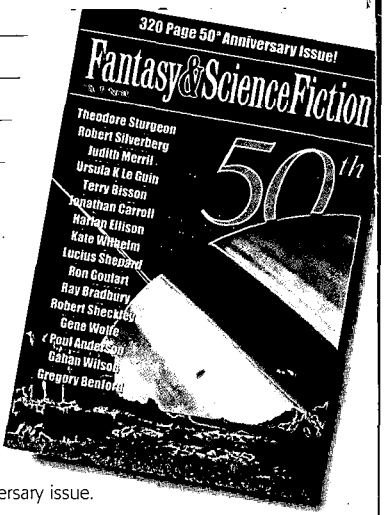

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